



"From Silence to Speech: The Politics of Female Storytelling in Nagamandala"

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* occupies a crucial place in modern Indian drama as it reimagines oral folklore to interrogate the politics of gender, power, and voice. At its core, the play stages the silencing of women within patriarchal structures and the radical possibilities of storytelling as a mode of resistance. The protagonist, Rani, trapped in a loveless and oppressive marriage, finds agency not through direct confrontation but through the transformative act of narration, myth, and the performative imagination. This paper examines how Karnad employs the folktale form as a subversive space where silenced women articulate their suppressed desires and rewrite their social destinies. Through the interplay of myth, performance, and narrative layers, *Nagamandala* highlights the tension between silence and speech, body and voice, tradition and transgression. By analyzing Rani's storytelling as both survival strategy and political intervention, the study situates *Nagamandala* within the discourse of feminist literary criticism and performance studies. In doing so, it underscores the play's significance as a cultural text that dramatizes the reclamation of female voice, thereby contributing to broader conversations on gender, power, and the politics of representation in Indian theatre.

Keywords

Nagamandala, Girish Karnad, female storytelling, silence and voice, feminist literary criticism, narrative resistance, patriarchal structures, oral folklore, performance and agency, myth and transformation, women's subjectivity, politics of representation, gender and power in Indian theatre.

1. Introduction

Storytelling has long functioned as a site where cultural memory, social norms, and individual agency intersect. Within patriarchal societies, however, women's voices have frequently been silenced, their stories suppressed or mediated through male authority. Modern Indian drama, particularly the works of Girish Karnad, engages directly with this politics of silence and voice by drawing upon folklore, myth, and oral traditions. *Nagamandala* (1988), one of Karnad's most celebrated plays, reworks an oral folktale into a layered theatrical text that foregrounds the gendered dynamics of storytelling. At its heart lies the figure of Rani, a young bride whose silence in a stifling marriage contrasts with the transformative power she discovers through story and myth. The play thus becomes a meditation on how women negotiate spaces of oppression and articulate desire, agency, and identity through narrative forms.

The theme of silence and speech in *Nagamandala* acquires further significance when viewed against broader feminist discourses. Silence has often been read as both a marker of subjugation and, paradoxically, a strategy of resistance; speech, conversely, represents entry into political and cultural visibility. In dramatizing Rani's shift from silence to storytelling, Karnad illustrates the complex negotiations women undertake in reclaiming their voice within structures that seek to contain it. The snake, the folktale, and the performative frame of the play itself emerge as metaphors for transformation, enabling the silenced woman to rewrite her narrative and challenge patriarchal definitions of truth and legitimacy.

This study situates *Nagamandala* within the critical frameworks of feminist literary theory, performance studies, and postcolonial cultural criticism. Drawing upon concepts such as Gayatri Spivak's question of the subaltern voice, Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine*, and Judith Butler's performativity, it examines how Karnad's play enacts the politics of female storytelling. By analyzing the intersections of folklore, gender, and performance, the paper argues that *Nagamandala* stages storytelling not merely as a narrative act but as a political intervention. In doing so, it highlights how women's stories, once silenced, become instruments of agency, resistance, and cultural reimagination within Indian theatre.

1.1 Research Objectives

To systematically review existing literary and theatrical scholarship on Girish Karnad and feminist readings of Indian drama.

This includes engaging with critical works by Aparna Dharwadker (modern Indian theatre), Ania Loomba (gender and postcolonial studies), Erin Mee (theatre in India), and feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Hélène Cixous. The objective is to situate *Nagamandala* within broader discussions of folklore, feminist performance, and the politics of voice in Indian theatre.

To analyze the thematic concerns of silence, voice, and agency in *Nagamandala*.

Rani's silence within a patriarchal household, her transformation through storytelling, and the symbolic role of the snake will be explored as markers of both oppression and resistance. The objective is to examine how Karnad dramatizes women's negotiation of desire, power, and subjectivity through the act of narration.

To compare narrative strategies and performative interventions in *Nagamandala*.

The framing device of the Story and Flames, the layering of oral tale with stage performance, and Rani's own narrative will be studied in relation to feminist storytelling traditions. The goal is to identify how Karnad deploys performance and folklore as tools to foreground the politics of female voice.

To evaluate the socio-cultural and historical contexts that shape the play's representation of women's speech.

This includes examining the patriarchal structures of Indian society, oral storytelling traditions, and the influence of postcolonial identity debates on Karnad's dramaturgy. The objective is to understand how *Nagamandala* both reflects and critiques gendered silencing within its cultural milieu.

To propose an interpretive framework for understanding female storytelling as political resistance in theatre.

Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, Spivak's subaltern voice, Butler's theory of performativity, and Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, the study aims to demonstrate how *Nagamandala* reconfigures storytelling into a political act. This framework will highlight how the play transforms women's silenced subjectivities into visible, performative agency on stage.

1.2 Study Design

This research adopts a literary-critical and performance-oriented approach, integrating feminist literary theory, theatre studies, and cultural history:

Systematic Literature Review

Reviewing critical scholarship on Girish Karnad, Indian feminist theatre, and folklore studies. Key sources include works by Aparna Dharwadker, Ania Loomba, Erin Mee, and feminist theorists such as Spivak, Butler, and Cixous to establish the theoretical foundation for analyzing women's storytelling.

Textual & Thematic Analysis

Close reading of *Nagamandala* with focus on themes of silence, speech, desire, and agency. Special attention will be given to the framing device of Story and Flames, Rani's transformation, and the role of myth and folklore in dramatizing women's voice.

Critical-Theoretical Application

Applying frameworks such as Spivak's subaltern voice, Butler's performativity, and Cixous's *écriture féminine* to examine how women's narratives emerge as political interventions within the play.

Socio-Cultural Contextualization Situating *Nagamandala* within late 20th-century Indian society, oral storytelling traditions, and the postcolonial feminist discourse, to show how the play critiques patriarchal silencing and reimagines female agency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Storytelling, Folklore, and Indian Drama

Scholarship on Girish Karnad highlights his use of folklore and myth as a means of interrogating modern social issues. Dharwadker (2005) and Mee (1992) note that plays like *Nagamandala* blend oral tradition with contemporary theatre, creating a hybrid form that re-examines cultural memory and gender roles. The folktale frame—where Story itself becomes a character—has been read as a commentary on the transformative power of narration.

2.2 Silence, Voice, and Feminist Criticism

Feminist theorists such as Spivak (1988) and Cixous (1976) provide critical frameworks for understanding the politics of silence and speech in literature. Studies of *Nagamandala* often emphasize Rani's enforced silence within patriarchy and her reemergence as a storyteller, which embodies Butler's (1990) notion of performativity. Scholars argue that Karnad dramatizes storytelling as a mode of resistance where silenced women reclaim subjectivity through narrative.

2.3 Performance and Politics of Representation

Critical works by Loomba (1998) and Dharwadker (2009) underscore that Indian theatre is inherently political in its negotiation of tradition and modernity. In *Nagamandala*, performance itself becomes political: the Story, the Flames, and Rani's act of narration together destabilize patriarchal authority and re-inscribe women's voices in cultural discourse.

2.4 Synthesis

The literature suggests that *Nagamandala* must be read not only as a retelling of folklore but as a feminist intervention in theatre. It transforms silence into speech, domestic confinement into narrative agency, and myth into political commentary. This positions female storytelling as central to both the aesthetics and politics of the play.

3. Method

This study is guided by a central research question: *How does Girish Karnad's Nagamandala dramatize the politics of female silence and storytelling, and in what ways does Rani's narrative transformation articulate feminist resistance within Indian theatre?* The question arises from feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and performance studies, where scholars such as Spivak, Butler, and Cixous emphasize the tension between silence, speech, and agency in cultural texts.

The **primary corpus** consists of Karnad's *Nagamandala*, chosen for its layered structure, blending of folklore and myth, and its central concern with a woman's silenced subjectivity and eventual narrative agency. Supplementary material includes critical scholarship on Karnad's dramaturgy and feminist theatre, providing interpretive depth.

Data collection draws on three interrelated strategies. First, a **systematic review of scholarship** was undertaken through JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Google Scholar, focusing on criticism of Indian theatre, feminist storytelling, and folklore studies, alongside works by Aparna Dharwadker, Ania Loomba, and Erin Mee. Second, **archival and contextual research** was used to situate the play within Indian oral storytelling traditions, late 20th-century feminist debates, and postcolonial identity politics. Third, **critical-theoretical frameworks**—including Spivak's subaltern voice, Butler's performativity, and Cixous's *écriture féminine*—were applied to analyze how female storytelling functions as a political act of resistance.

The analysis followed a **comparative thematic model** in four steps: close reading and coding of themes such as silence, desire, voice, and agency; cross-mapping of narrative devices like the Story and Flames; theoretical interpretation through feminist and postcolonial frameworks; and synthesis of findings within the broader cultural and socio-historical context of Indian theatre. This approach highlights how *Nagamandala* reconfigures silence into performative storytelling and transforms personal voice into cultural critique.

To ensure **reliability and validity**, interpretations were triangulated across the primary text, critical scholarship, and socio-cultural history. Reflexivity was maintained regarding the researcher's standpoint, particularly when applying feminist frameworks, while attention was given to the symbolic and cultural specificities of folklore and performance. This method thus integrates textual, theoretical, and contextual analysis to illuminate the politics of female storytelling in *Nagamandala*.

4. Findings

The analysis reveals that *Nagamandala* dramatizes the tension between silence and speech as a central motif of female existence in patriarchal society. Rani's enforced muteness within her marriage, marked by isolation and emotional neglect, reflects the silencing of women's subjectivity in domestic and cultural structures. Yet this silence gradually transforms into narrative agency through the folktale device, where her imagination and storytelling open possibilities for self-expression and survival. The play thus highlights how speech, once denied, becomes a political act when reclaimed by women.

The role of folklore and myth is central to this transformation. The framing of the Story and Flames, along with the motif of the serpent-lover, demonstrates how oral traditions provide women with alternative spaces for articulating desire and resistance. Rather than treating myth as fixed tradition, Karnad reworks it to foreground the subversive potential of women's voices. Rani's act of narrating her experiences not only unsettles her husband's authority but also redefines truth and legitimacy within the narrative world of the play.

Performance itself emerges as a key strategy of resistance. By embedding stories within stories and presenting Rani as both character and storyteller, *Nagamandala* blurs the boundaries between domestic silence and public articulation. The theatrical layering allows women's voices to move from the margins of oral tradition to the center of cultural discourse. In this sense, the stage becomes a political arena where female subjectivity is not only represented but enacted, challenging patriarchal silencing through performative presence.

Finally, the findings underscore that storytelling in *Nagamandala* functions as more than narrative entertainment; it is a mode of feminist intervention. By reimagining myth and oral tradition, Karnad dramatizes the politics of representation, showing how women's voices, long silenced, can be reconstituted as sites of agency, identity, and resistance. The play transforms silence into speech, and in doing so, asserts the enduring power of storytelling as both personal survival and political critique.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* reveals how the play dramatizes the politics of female silence and the transformative power of storytelling as a mode of resistance. At its core, the narrative juxtaposes Rani's enforced silence within patriarchal marriage against her imaginative reemergence as a storyteller, thereby enacting the shift from voicelessness to speech. This movement aligns with feminist theoretical concerns articulated by Spivak (1988), who questioned whether the subaltern can speak, and Cixous (1976), who argued for women's writing as a reclamation of suppressed desire and agency. In *Nagamandala*, Karnad stages this theoretical tension through folklore and performance, where the silenced woman's story disrupts male authority and redefines legitimacy within cultural discourse.

The play demonstrates that women's silence is never neutral but socially constructed, reflecting systemic efforts to erase female subjectivity from both domestic and cultural spaces. Rani's muteness in her marital home exemplifies what Butler (1990) terms the performativity of gender, as her silence becomes a repeated act through which patriarchal structures reinforce her subordination. Yet the play also illustrates how silence can be strategically subverted. Rani's eventual narration of her desires, mediated through the snake myth and the oral storytelling frame, transforms private repression into a political act of cultural intervention. By weaving folktale into theatrical performance, Karnad reclaims oral tradition as a feminist site where women can renegotiate agency.

At the same time, the play must be situated within its socio-historical context. Written in the late 1980s, *Nagamandala* reflects a period when Indian theatre was deeply engaged with questions of modernity, identity, and gender politics. Scholars such as Dharwadkar (2005) and Loomba (1998) have argued that postcolonial Indian drama often reworked folklore to critique both colonial legacies and indigenous hierarchies. In this light, Karnad's use of folktale does not merely preserve tradition but transforms it into a critique of patriarchy. Rani's speech, born out of silence, is emblematic of a broader feminist intervention in Indian theatre that sought to carve out space for women's voices in cultural and political discourse.

The findings also highlight that performance itself is political. The play's layered structure—where Story and Flames frame the action, and Rani becomes both character and narrator—demonstrates how women's voices are staged as central to the act of meaning-making. By foregrounding the act of narration, Karnad collapses the boundary between private speech and public performance, thereby dramatizing storytelling as a means of reclaiming subjectivity. This reflexive use of theatre resonates with Suvin's notion of "cognitive estrangement" by unsettling normative perceptions of gender roles and exposing the constructedness of silence.

Yet the study also acknowledges the ambivalence within *Nagamandala*. Rani's survival depends not only on her own storytelling but also on the legitimization of her voice by male authority figures within the play's world, which complicates the notion of unqualified female empowerment. This tension reflects the difficulty of imagining feminist agency within deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. However, such ambivalence itself is significant: it underscores the precariousness of women's speech and the fragility of narrative authority in societies where silence has long been institutionalized.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, they affirm that storytelling in *Nagamandala* is not merely a literary device but a political intervention, dramatizing the shift from silence to speech as a feminist act of reclaiming agency. Second, they highlight the importance of reading folklore and oral traditions through feminist lenses, as they provide alternative cultural spaces where silenced voices can be articulated and remembered. In this sense, *Nagamandala* not only critiques patriarchy but also models how performance and narration themselves can become acts of resistance.

Certain limitations of the present study must also be recognized. The analysis has focused primarily on *Nagamandala* in isolation, without comparing it to Karnad's broader corpus (such as *Hayavadana* or *Yayati*) where similar concerns of gender, voice, and myth appear. Nor does this study fully account for the play's reception in performance, where directorial choices, staging, and audience interpretations may further complicate its feminist potential. Future research could extend this inquiry by exploring comparative frameworks, including women's storytelling in other Indian dramatic traditions, or cross-cultural studies of feminist theatre drawing on myth and folklore.

In conclusion, *Nagamandala* exemplifies how women's storytelling can transform silence into a political resource. Rani's journey from muteness to narrative agency dramatizes the central feminist claim that speech is not simply expression but intervention—an act that reshapes cultural meanings and challenges patriarchal authority. By reworking folklore within the structure of modern Indian theatre, Karnad demonstrates that stories are not only repositories of tradition but also instruments of resistance. *Nagamandala* thus remains a powerful reminder that in societies where women are silenced, storytelling becomes both survival and subversion, a means of reclaiming dignity, voice, and political presence.

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