ON STORYTELLING: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF GIRISH KARNAD’S
NAGAMANDALA

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All that is on the stage is a sign

(Veltrusky, “Man and Object in the Theatre”)

The stage is a semiotic space where signs are set in motion to generate possible meanings in relation to the plot. Everything that is put up on stage has a signifying function or let’s say that whatever is used on stage acquires a semiotic quality. The semiotic units are varied ranging from actors, props, costumes to lights and so on. Each of these units come together to bring alive the story of the play through their performance. It implies that every play has a story to tell or perform and so has Karnad’s Nagamandala. Growing up in Sirsi, Karnad was exposed to different types of traditional theatres and was heavily influenced by Yakshagana performances and folk tales (Mukherjee 28). Nagamandala is also based on two folk tales-one where the Flames gather in a dilapidated temple and their gossip is overheard by a Man who stands in risk of losing his life unless he keeps awake whole night; and the other about Rani, her husband and her snake-lover.

According to Karnad folk tales can emerge in different forms and told in innumerable ways (Mukherjee 42). His Nagamandala emerges as an allegorical representation of the act of storytelling. Storytelling, like drama, is also a performance that requires the skill of the storyteller and cooperation of the audience for a successful presentation. Stories are abstract entities that are brought to life through the human body that performs it. In dramatic performance the human bodies or the characters become signs on stage where each character signifies to one or more class of signified. Signs help in generating meaning out of the performance. For instance- the Flames here represent not merely fire or light but those typical gossip-loving Indian women (or maids) who gather around to exchange stories about their home and neighbourhood. Their coming together as enthusiastic audience to the Story reproduces the atmosphere of storytelling in traditional Indian households. The characters, thus, function on stage as “icon” wherein they acquire meaning beyond their stipulated roles in the play. Sebeok describes an icon as a sign that is made to “resemble, stimulate or reproduce its referent” in some way (10). In this way Karnad uses all his characters to reproduce a practice which is sadly fading away in the busy materialistic modern life. This paper would, therefore, make a semiotic reading of Nagamandala as a treatise on storytelling. Simultaneously it would also reveal Karnad’s skill as a storyteller as to how he uses the characters to recreate a lost tradition.

The genre of storytelling, since time immemorial, has largely been the domain of women, especially old women. Until the emergence of the written culture, storytelling had been part of only the oral tradition27. The oral culture rendered it the quality of liveliness and spontaneity. A 1999 survey on storytelling in India by Lee-Ellen Marvin revealed that the availability of story books and television changed the means of entertainment for the children. Story-reading became more popular than story-telling. Nonetheless it wasn’t a completely lost tradition since stories were still told to young children to boost their moral conduct (macdonald 102-5). But storytelling has always been a community affair more than the solitariness of reading story books. In the oral culture stories were preserved by passing it from one teller to another; its survival depended on its circulation. In Nagamandala Karnad creates this community set up very vividly, by gathering his characters in a ruined temple, where not only stories survive but they become source of survival for others as well. Through the multilayered structure of his play Karnad intertwines one story with another building up the atmosphere where stories connect people. For instance- the play begins with the Man sharing his story with the audience, he then happens to overhear the stories of the Flames and then they together listen to the narrative told by the Story. In this way strangers become familiar and storytelling becomes a community affair28. The characters on stage, therefore, are not merely actors playing the given roles but are signs signifying to the traditional ambience of storytelling in past times. Their exchange brings to life the stories that would have lost their existence unless shared. For example-

NEW FLAME: Let me explain: My mistress, the old woman, knows a story and a song. But all these years she has kept them to herself, never told the story, nor sung the song. So the story and the song were being choked, imprisoned inside her. (Prologue 4)

27 Here it means that stories were circulated only through the oral mode.
28 Not necessarily always a public gathering but at the domestic level too.
It clearly signifies that stories are meant to be retold because the oral tradition has no other means of preserving the stories than retelling them. It can be seen as a limitation of the oral text as sometimes stories die along with its owner and therefore lost forever. As such the act of storytelling relies on its audience for approval and transmission:

**STORY:** You can’t just listen to the story and leave it at that. You must tell it again to someone else. (Prologue 5)

Stories are born out of encounters between different people and culture and they survive when retold. However, the process of retelling isn’t a simple exercise because at times stories undergo change when retold.

Edward Said argues in his 1982 essay “Travelling Theory” that theories develop out of certain historical and social issues but when they travel from their point of origin to the new location, they undergo change and transform themselves according to their present location (226-27). Similarly stories also change when they travel from one teller to another. Factors might be varied but it changes mostly in relation to its listener. For instance, Marvin records that stories were sometimes edited to suit the age of the listener (103). In the play **Nagamandala**, Rani’s story changes twice- initially Story ends her tale with Rani recognised as the goddess and Appanna her forever slave. But the Man doesn’t appreciate it as it provides no clue about the plight of Kurudevva, Kappanna or Naga. So on his insistence Story reframes the end where Naga dies in Rani’s tresses. This time the Flames weren’t satisfied and wanted a happy ending. On their demand the Man reframes the end where Naga is instead saved and hidden in Rani’s tresses. As the story travels, the end narrated by the Story (teller) is reinterpreted by the Man (new teller) on behalf of the Flames (listener/audience). It therefore implies that the act of retelling also means reinterpreting. The interference of audience gives rise to multiple interpretations and the play vibrates with all sorts of possible meanings. It is the authority of the teller and the demand of the audience that necessitates the change calling immediately to our attention the role of the audience in performance. In an interview Karnad says that theatrical communication begins and ends with the spectator (Mukherjee 40). Every story needs an audience to watch/listen and appreciate it without which the performance remains incomplete. Therefore the storyteller has to be always aware of the taste of its audience and the beginning of the play suggests that Karnad is a well-informed storyteller. A storyteller’s basic skill is his ability to hold his audience’s attention throughout the story. But the Man in the play is a poor playwright who has failed to do so and earned in return his audience’s curse. Apparently it is the individual situation of the Man in the play but if studied in depth the Man is only a symbol, a sign signifying to the plight of all those playwrights and storytellers who fail to entertain their audience. These characters are, therefore, not to be seen as individual characters but as signs: each representing their signified class.

While the Man signifies the class of playwrights the Story signifies the class of storytellers, particularly women. Storytelling in India has mostly been the domain of women, especially grandmothers. The structure of Indian joint families granted grandmothers the responsibility of storytelling, not only because they had leisure time but also as they had more experience. Marvin’s study shows that in Indian middle-class families, women were considered specialised as storytellers. But among them grandmothers had more privilege because they were the senior most, and experienced, women in the family and this gave them the authority to take up the role of storytellers. In middle class families stories were also directed at boosting the moral character of the child. Since women with more experience had larger stocks of myriad stories, so grandmothers were better suited to this endeavour. Karnad represents this aspect very artistically by transforming the ‘story’ and ‘song’ into a woman and her saree- just as a saree adds beauty to a woman, so does a song to a story. Although the Flames do not have corporeal body but through their female voices they signify those groups of women who gather, in their leisure hours, to gossip about their neighbourhood and thereby share their individual stories. Women are mostly recognised as good conversationists and with more knowledge they become excellent storytellers as well. The elderly woman’s confidence is well depicted in Kurudevva’s suggestion to Rani (about winning her husband’s love through the magical root paste) as she shares her personal story with Rani. In writing the play Karnad has been very observant to include all these nuances of the culture of storytelling in India. He learnt a lot about it by studying folk tales and hearing from A.K Ramanujan, and contributed by enhancing the “theatrical appeal and dialectical possibilities” (Mukherjee 47)

Another aspect of storytelling is its selective nature. Stories can be real or fictitious depending on the events chosen by the storyteller. For instance- while taking the snake-ordeal, to prove her innocence before the village elders, Rani told the truth but only partially. She admitted that other than Appanna and the King Cobra, she had neither touched nor allowed to be touched by any other male. While this was certainly the truth, it was

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29 My research isn’t built around any particular performance; rather it looks at all the possible performances suggested by the text.

30 Telling the story through his characters in the play.

31 It’s mostly women but examples of men as storytellers are also found; though rare.
not the complete story because Rani didn’t say about her encounter with Naga every night, even if she had insights about that. It is interesting to see how the choice of events decides the fate of Rani. The half-truth that she shares raises her to the pedestal of a goddess while the complete story could have brought her down to the status of a whore. After hearing the folk tales Karnad was intrigued by the thought as to how would a woman, in a conservative Indian society, face the fact that the man who visits her at night is not her husband. Would she commit a deliberate adultery or what kind of truth and half-truths would she say to avoid facing the unpleasant reality? For Karnad storytelling provides the “mode for expressing the yearning for love of the women often deserted or neglected in the patriarchal social system” (Mukherjee 42-43). Probably through the end, as reframed by the Man, Karnad has tried to justify the desires of woman as naturally as that of man\(^{22}\). It is this intermixing of old forms and contemporary ideas that shapes his new hybrid theatre.

However, the representation of this old form is not achieved exclusively by the characterisation of the play. The choice of location or the background against which the play is set is equally significant. Susan Bennett in her book Theatre Audience: A theory of production and reception suggests that the geographical location is always important for a play because the location needs to attract the audience (120). Karnad’s plays usually have an unusual stage setting that relates to some remote locations. Nagamandala also opens in such a location of an old ruined temple which attracts the audience’s attention and also makes them curious. Folk tales and myths are best represented in mysterious atmospheres. For a successful performance it is very important to gain the audience’s faith in the story. To generate the willing suspension of disbelief for accepting the mythical character of Naga or the talking Flames, for a modern audience, the location of a dilapidated temple in a village at the hour of midnight is perfectly justifiable. The distant location would take the audience to a different time and assist in familiarising with an otherwise unfamiliar story.\(^{33}\) Locations are, therefore, equally important signs in reproducing the art of storytelling. Besides complementing the mysterious stories, the ruined temple also complements to the ruined state of the practice of storytelling. The ruined temple symbolises the presence yet neglected state of the art of storytelling. In this way the theatrical space acts as a semiotic field where all that is put up on stage turns into a sign of something.

Nagamandala is one of the notable works of Karnad that establishes him as an excellent playwright and storyteller. In his plays the worlds of reality and fantasy (or myth) blend together so well that an altogether new world is born. The play-within-a-play technique makes his plays multidimensional to allow the readers and audiences to address it with different viewpoints. Of all possibilities Nagamandala is also a play about ‘storytelling’, a practice that is losing its relevance in the digital world. Karnad’s attempt introduces the modern audience to the art form that had been a source of entertainment until mass media crept into their lives. Besides entertainment storytelling also looked at developing the moral character of children; it brought people of myriad backgrounds together on the same plane; it provided for encounters between different cultures and traditions and above all it preserved the heritage of India’s oral culture. It would be wrong to say that storytelling is no longer practised but it has definitely reduced to an occasional event. Storytelling will survive as long as people communicate with each other. The forms might keep altering, from oral to written to theatrical, but stories will always survive.

**Works cited:**