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Serpent, Story, and Self: Magical Realism as Feminist Praxis in Girish Karnad's Nagamandala

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Abstract
Girish Karnad's Nagamandala (1988) reworks two Kannada folktales narrated to him by the folklorist A. K. Ramanujan into a play that fuses the conventions of internationally recognized magical realism with an indigenous oral narrative form. This essay argues that Karnad's use of the marvellous is not decorative but structurally load-bearing: it is the play's central feminist mechanism, opening for its protagonist Rani a register of desire, agency, and self-articulation that the "realistic" world of her arranged marriage forecloses. Reading Nagamandala through Wendy B. Faris's model of magical realism alongside the Kannada oral tradition of katha, this essay traces how the play both borrows from and swerves away from the Latin American tradition associated with Gabriel García Márquez and the postcolonial tradition associated with Salman Rushdie, deploying the marvellous not primarily for historical or national allegory but to stage an intimate, gendered contest over who is permitted to speak, desire, and survive.

Keywords: magical realism, Girish Karnad, Nagamandala, Indian folk drama, feminist theatre, oral narrative

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Introduction

Every night in Girish Karnad's Nagamandala, before a single line of the central story is spoken, a cluster of flames gathers in a ruined temple to talk. They have escaped, one by one, from the households whose lamps they once were, and they carry with them the gossip of a hundred kitchens: whose husband beats her, whose son has fled to the city, whose bride cries after the lights are put out. Into this gathering walks a woman who is not quite a woman — she is Story itself, condemned to wander formlessly until someone agrees to tell her. This frame, more than a decorative flourish, announces the method of the whole play: the ordinary and the impossible will share the same stage, the same breath, without either party finding the arrangement strange. Karnad's play concerns Rani, a young bride sequestered by an indifferent husband, Appanna, who visits her only for a midday meal and otherwise ignores her; a love potion administered by a well-meaning older woman; and a cobra who drinks the discarded potion, falls in love with Rani, and thereafter visits her nightly in the exact likeness of the husband who will not touch her. When the deception is discovered, Rani's fidelity is tested by an ordeal that only the marvellous can resolve, and the village accepts an impossible verdict as binding fact.

This essay argues that Nagamandala does not simply import the mode of magical realism associated with the Latin American "Boom" novelists and their postcolonial inheritors; it indigenizes that mode by rooting it in pre-existing Kannada oral storytelling conventions, and it deploys the resulting fusion as a deliberate feminist strategy. The magical elements of the play — the cobra-lover, the talking flames, the personified Story — are not ornamental gestures toward folk colour. They constitute the only narrative space in which Rani's desire, agency,

and interiority can be legitimately expressed within a domestic structure that otherwise has no vocabulary for her. Read this way, the play's marvellous machinery is inseparable from its sexual politics: to ask what the cobra means is also to ask what a woman is permitted to want, and by what means she may be believed. The discussion that follows first situates Nagamandala within the critical genealogy of magical realism, then turns to the play's oral roots and its self-conscious frame narrative, before offering a close analysis of the central scenes in which the human and the serpentine interpenetrate, and finally considering how this interpenetration functions as feminist praxis rather than mere fantasy.

Theorizing Magical Realism: From Latin America to the Indian Stage

The term "magical realism" began its career not in literature but in painting. Franz Roh coined Magischer Realismus in 1925 to describe a strand of post-Expressionist German art that rendered ordinary objects with an uncanny, hyper-precise clarity, as though the visible world itself concealed a second, stranger order just beneath its surface. The term migrated to fiction chiefly through Alejo Carpentier's related but distinct concept of lo real maravilloso americano — the "marvellous real" that Carpentier argued was not an aesthetic technique imposed on Latin America from outside but a condition already latent in its landscapes, histories, and syncretic belief systems. It was Gabriel García Márquez, however, who gave the mode its most widely recognized literary form, presenting the impossible (ascending bodies, prophetic dreams, plagues of forgetting) in the same flat, documentary tone used for census figures and weather, so that marvel and mundanity share a single register of narration.

Wendy B. Faris, whose taxonomy remains one of the most useful frameworks for identifying the mode across national traditions, distills magical realist fiction into several recurring features: the text contains an "irreducible element" of magic that cannot be explained away by natural law; the phenomenal, verifiable world is nonetheless rendered with careful realistic detail; the reader experiences a productive hesitation between two incompatible understandings of events; the narrative merges different realms — the living and the dead, the dreaming and the waking, the human and the animal; and received, linear ideas of time, space, and personal identity are quietly destabilized. These criteria travel well to Karnad's play. The cobra's transformation is never rationalized, explained as delusion, or narratively punished as impossible; the domestic details of Rani's kitchen, her loneliness, and the village's social surveillance are rendered with unsparing realism; the audience is left genuinely uncertain whether Rani has been the victim of a trick, the beneficiary of divine intervention, or something in between; and the ordeal by the snake pit collapses the distinction between the legal-social realm of village justice and the sacred realm of the cobra deity.

Yet transplanting a Latin American critical vocabulary onto an Indian text carries risks that this essay does not wish to ignore. Several scholars of South Asian literature have cautioned that "magical realism," when applied uncritically to postcolonial writing, can flatten distinct indigenous cosmologies into a single global brand, treating deities, spirits, and shape-shifting animals as local colour serving an essentially Western narrative technique, rather than as living elements of belief and practice with their own histories. In the Indian context specifically, the coexistence of the human and the divine, or the human and the animal, is not typically experienced by audiences as a rupture of the natural order requiring a special literary category at all; it is simply how a great many stories, and indeed a great many everyday devotional practices, already work. A cobra who is also a lover, or a lamp-flame who is also a gossip, does not violate a prior realist contract the way it would in a nineteenth-century European novel, because the oral and devotional traditions that produced these figures never signed such a contract to begin with.

This caution intersects with a related but distinct body of postcolonial theory concerned with cultural hybridity, in which forms travelling between a metropolitan literary market and a regional oral tradition are never simply absorbed intact but are reshaped, in the process of translation, into something neither purely local nor purely

borrowed. Karnad's own biography models this hybridity directly: a Konkani-speaking, Kannada-writing playwright educated partly in England, working across English and Kannada, and self-consciously in conversation with Brecht, with Sanskrit dramatic theory, and with the international repertoire of his own theatrical moment. To call Nagamandala an instance of magical realism is therefore not to claim that Karnad discovered the mode secondhand from García Márquez and applied it to Kannada material; it is to notice a structural resemblance between two literary strategies that arose from different soil, and to ask what each tradition can illuminate in the other, while resisting the temptation to let the more institutionally powerful, internationally canonized term simply annex the older, more local one.

The position this essay takes is therefore a mediating one: magical realism remains a genuinely useful comparative lens for situating Nagamandala within a global literary conversation, and Karnad himself was self-consciously in dialogue with international theatre and fiction when he wrote it. But the term must be held alongside, and partly subordinated to, the specific Kannada oral tradition — the janapada katha, or village folktale — from which the play's plot and its narrative frame are directly drawn. Magical realism, in other words, is the vocabulary an English-language critical audience can use to name what is happening in Nagamandala; it is not the source of what is happening. That source is oral, local, and considerably older than the literary movement with which it is being compared.

Oral Roots and the Frame Narrative

Karnad has been candid about the origins of Nagamandala: the play reworks two folktales he heard narrated by the linguist and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan, who prefaced them by noting that these were "women's tales," told by women to other women, often while performing household tasks that allowed the story to be picked up and set down across an afternoon. Karnad has remarked that such tales, precisely because they are transmitted within a community of women rather than authored by a single literary figure, already contain within themselves a critique of the patriarchal structures they seem, on the surface, to accept. A folktale narrated within a household economy of shared labour does not need a modern feminist theoretical apparatus bolted onto it from outside; it has frequently already smuggled such a critique into its own narrative logic, encoded in the very fact that its women characters get to speak, scheme, suffer, and occasionally triumph on terms the surrounding social order would never grant them directly.

Karnad preserves and dramatizes this orality rather than smoothing it into a conventional dramatic exposition. The play opens not with Rani and Appanna but with a Man under a curse: condemned by a playwright's failed drama to remain awake through the night in a crumbling temple, on pain of death should he fall asleep. He is kept company, and ultimately kept alive, by a company of flames who arrive one by one from houses across the region, gossiping about the domestic lives they have illuminated and, in one case, about a woman — Story herself — who has been trapped, untold, for years, and who now enters the temple in bodily form. The flames and Story persuade the Man to let her be told through him; she takes on the shape of a young bride, and the play we call Nagamandala is, in this framing, not a story Karnad is narrating to us but a story escaping into utterance through a cursed man in an emptied temple, midwifed by talking lamps.

This frame does more than provide an atmospheric prologue. It performs, at the level of theatrical form, the very claim the play will go on to make at the level of content: that certain truths — a woman's desire, an unspeakable story, a name that cannot be given directly — can only enter the world through indirection, disguise, and a chain of intermediaries who are not fully human. Story cannot simply announce herself in her own voice to the village; she requires a Man cursed into passivity, a chorus of eavesdropping flames, and the fiction of embodiment as a young bride. The play's central heroine, Rani, will likewise be unable to speak her desire directly to Appanna, to her in-laws, or to the village elders; she too will require an intermediary that is not fully human — a cobra wearing her husband's face — through which her interior life can, for the first time, be voiced and acted upon. The frame

narrative is thus not separate from the magical realism of the inner play; it is the same mechanism, operating one level up, and its presence signals to the audience from the very first minutes that indirection through the marvellous is the play's chosen grammar for female speech, before Rani has said a single word.

This use of a frame narrator also situates Karnad within a much older indigenous dramatic convention rather than only a folkloric one. Classical Sanskrit drama traditionally opens with a prastavana, a prologue in which a sutradhara — literally, "the holder of the strings" — addresses the audience directly, introduces the players, and mediates between the world of the theatre and the world of the spectators before the main action begins. Karnad's flames and his figure of Story perform a recognizably related function, threading the audience into the inner play through a layer of self-conscious theatrical mediation rather than presenting Nagamandala as a self-contained realist illusion the audience simply observes from outside. The effect of drawing on both a Sanskrit high-dramatic convention and a Kannada oral folk convention within the same frame is to signal that Karnad's magical realism is doubly indigenous: it is not only borrowing the marvellous content of a village folktale but also the specific theatrical technology — the sutradhara's mediating address — through which South Asian dramatic tradition has long managed the relationship between the ordinary world of the audience and the heightened world of the stage. Magical realism as an imported critical term thus arrives, in this play, to describe a technique that Karnad has assembled from resources that predate the term by centuries.

The Cobra, the Potion, and the Merging of Realms

The engine of the plot is deceptively small: an elderly woman named Kurudavva, moved by pity for the neglected young bride, gives Rani two roots — one to make Appanna love her, one to make him permanently obedient — ground into a paste to be mixed into his food. Frightened by the paste's alarming colour when mixed with milk, Rani pours it away outside rather than risk poisoning her husband, and it is a passing cobra who drinks the discarded potion. The cobra, transformed by the love-charm meant for a human husband, falls in love with Rani and begins visiting her at night in the exact bodily form of Appanna, so that Rani — who has never seen her real husband show her the smallest tenderness — receives, for the first time, a husband who speaks gently to her, desires her, and treats the marriage bed as a site of mutuality rather than obligation. By day, Appanna continues to visit only for his midday meal and to treat Rani with contempt or indifference; by night, "Appanna" is an entirely different man.

What is critical here, from a magical-realist standpoint, is the tone in which this doubling is presented. Karnad does not stage Rani's confusion as delusion, hysteria, or a dream sequence bracketed off from the "real" plot; the play offers no interior monologue in which Rani wonders whether she has imagined the whole thing, nor does any other character, once the situation becomes known, propose that the cobra-husband was merely a hallucination brought on by loneliness. The two Appannas — the cold daytime original and the tender nocturnal double — are treated by the dramatic action as equally, flatly real, existing side by side in the same house, sharing the same body's appearance, without the play ever offering the audience the comfort of a rationalizing frame. This is precisely Faris's "irreducible element" of magic: not a symbol to be decoded back into ordinary psychology, but an event the text insists actually occurred, alongside a scrupulously realistic depiction of the gendered domestic arrangements — the isolation of a young bride in her husband's household, the surveillance of female behaviour by mothers-in-law and neighbours, the total absence of any legitimate channel through which Rani might complain about her marriage — that surround it.

The consequences of this doubling arrive when Rani becomes pregnant. Appanna, who knows he has not slept with his wife, denounces her before the village elders as an adulteress, and the community moves toward a resolution only the marvellous can supply: Rani is made to swear her innocence by picking up a cobra from an anthill with her bare hands, on the understanding that a guilty woman will be bitten and killed while an innocent one will be spared. Rani takes up the snake — very likely her nocturnal lover in his true form — and, addressing

the assembled village, swears that she has touched no man except her husband and this cobra. The snake does not bite her; instead, by local report, it rises and spreads its hood over her head like a protective canopy, an image drawn directly from iconography associated with the serpent-deity Nagaraja. The village, witnessing what it takes to be an unambiguous divine sign, declares Rani innocent and elevates her, from that day forward, to the status of a woman specially favoured by the gods.

This ordeal scene is the play's single most important magical-realist set piece, because it demonstrates how thoroughly the marvellous has been absorbed into the social and legal apparatus of the community rather than existing apart from it, as spectacle or miracle to be marvelled at from a safe distance. The village does not treat the snake's mercy as an inexplicable wonder that troubles its ordinary categories of truth and falsehood; it treats the ordeal's outcome as dispositive legal evidence, exactly as a modern court might treat forensic testimony. The supernatural, in other words, is not counterposed to the "real" order of village justice in Nagamandala; it is folded directly into that order as one of its normal evidentiary procedures, and this folding-in is precisely what Faris means by the "merging of realms." What makes the scene additionally rich, though, is the ambiguity Karnad refuses to resolve for the audience even as he allows the village to resolve it definitively for itself. Is Rani's oath a truth cleverly worded to be technically accurate while remaining wildly misleading to her listeners — since she has, after all, touched no man but her husband and a cobra, both of whom are, unbeknownst to the village, the same being? Is she complicit in constructing this ambiguity, or innocent of any awareness that the cobra and Appanna are one? Has she been deceived by a predatory serpent, rescued by a compassionate one, or has she, without ever fully naming it to herself, simply chosen to accept the more loving of the two men who share her husband's face? The play's magical-realist mode permits it to leave all three readings simultaneously available, refusing the single determinate answer that a purely realist drama, forced to choose between "adultery" and "innocence" as mutually exclusive legal facts, would have had to supply.

It is worth pausing, too, on what the play does with the cobra's own interiority, since a purely victim-centred reading of Rani risks overlooking a further complication Karnad builds into the plot. The cobra is not a predator disguised as a saviour; the text gives him longing, patience, and a willingness to accept an entirely borrowed identity, appearing only in another man's shape and never once in the play claiming Rani for himself under his own name. He courts her without ever fully possessing the position he occupies, night after night inhabiting a marriage that is legally and socially not his, and his eventual act of mercy at the anthill — refusing to bite the woman he loves even when doing so would have ended the ambiguity that threatens him as much as her — reads less as an assertion of serpentine power than as a final, silent renunciation. This detail matters for the play's larger argument, because it suggests that the marvellous in Nagamandala does not simply grant Rani a hidden channel of desire while leaving male power untouched; it also requires the play's one figure of unambiguous tenderness to remain permanently unnamed, unacknowledged, and without legal or social existence of his own. Desire, in other words, is grantable in this world only on condition that it never fully surfaces into daylight identity — a condition that binds the cobra as tightly as it binds Rani, even as the costs of that condition fall overwhelmingly on her.

The audience, meanwhile, occupies a position structurally similar to Rani's own uncertainty, and this too is a deliberate effect rather than an incidental one. Because the play withholds any authoritative narratorial voice that might confirm what "really" happened — the frame narrative, after all, has already told us that what we are watching is Story escaping into utterance through a cursed man, not a stable historical record — viewers are left to adjudicate the ordeal's meaning using exactly the same incomplete evidence available to the village elders. This shared epistemic position between audience and community is itself a magical-realist strategy in Faris's sense of "unsettling doubts": the hesitation the mode is designed to produce in a reader or viewer is not a side

effect of the plot's ambiguity but the primary means by which Nagamandala implicates its audience in the very act of judgment it is simultaneously interrogating.

Magic as Feminist Strategy

If the preceding analysis has established that the marvellous in Nagamandala is structurally serious rather than decorative, the next question is what specifically it accomplishes for the play's female protagonist that a purely realist register could not. The answer, this essay argues, is agency: Rani experiences desire, tenderness, and even authorship of her own life exclusively within the magical register of the play, and is granted none of these things within its realist register. By day, under the "real" Appanna, Rani is confined to the house, forbidden to go outside, spoken to with contempt, and treated as an domestic instrument rather than a person with an interior life; by night, under the cobra's assumed form, she is courted, listened to, and desired. It is not incidental that Rani's only sexual and emotional fulfilment in the entire play occurs in the register the audience is invited to read as magical; the play structures its two Appannas so that tenderness itself becomes legible only as the marvellous, as though ordinary patriarchal marriage in this world has no native capacity to produce a husband who loves his wife, and such a husband can only be conjured into being through a folk-magical intervention that exceeds the bounds of the everyday.

This has an evident affinity with a broader feminist critical observation, applicable well beyond this play, that women's speech and desire, when structurally denied a direct or sanctioned channel, are often compelled to travel through coded, oblique, or displaced routes in order to be expressed at all — through silence that must be read symptomatically, through indirection, or, in the specific vocabulary this essay is developing, through the marvellous. One should be cautious about mapping this observation too neatly onto any single theoretical vocabulary developed for a different historical and geographical context; the point of comparison here is suggestive rather than a claim of direct equivalence. What can be said with more confidence is that Nagamandala dramatizes, with unusual clarity, a situation in which a woman's only avenue to being heard, believed, and desired runs through a channel that is not fully her own voice — first the cobra who speaks and acts through Appanna's borrowed shape, and then the snake ordeal, whose oath is legible to the village only because it is worded ambiguously enough to be received as a divine confirmation of chastity rather than as the plain statement of fact it also, on another reading, is.

The Concluding Chorus, meanwhile, if considered alongside the ordinary female networks the play depicts elsewhere, adds a further dimension to this argument. It is a woman, Kurudavva, who first sets the plot's magical mechanism in motion, out of a specifically female solidarity with Rani's loneliness rather than out of any request from Rani herself; it is women's oral culture, transmitted household to household exactly as Ramanujan describes, that supplies both the love-root and the narrative frame in which the whole play is embedded. The marvellous in Nagamandala is thus not simply something that happens to an isolated woman from outside; it circulates through an entire informal network of female knowledge, care, and storytelling that operates alongside, and partly beneath the notice of, the formal patriarchal institutions of marriage and village justice. This suggests a further refinement of the feminist claim being made here: the play's magic is not simply a compensation an individual woman receives for what marriage denies her, but the visible trace of an ongoing, collective, largely invisible female economy of mutual aid, of which Rani's cobra-lover is only the most dramatically heightened instance.

The play's ending compounds rather than resolves this ambiguity. Rani, elevated to the status of a woman touched by divine favour, is no longer the neglected, silenced bride of the opening scenes; she has, in the most literal sense the plot allows, been transformed by her encounter with the marvellous into someone the village must now honour rather than ignore. Yet this elevation is itself a new form of containment rather than a straightforward liberation. Rani has not gained the right to speak her desire in her own voice, to name what actually happened to her, or to choose a husband on her own terms; she has instead been absorbed into a new social role — the specially

favoured, semi-sacred wife — that the community assigns to her, and that depends for its stability on the very ambiguity the play has spent its length cultivating. Should the full truth of the cobra's identity and Rani's possible awareness of it ever become explicit rather than merely implied, the entire structure of village belief that now protects and honours her would presumably collapse into the charge of adultery it was meant to disprove. Rani's apparent victory is therefore inseparable from a new and arguably more totalizing form of surveillance: she is safe only for as long as the ambiguity holds, only for as long as the marvellous is permitted to stand in for a truth she is never invited to state plainly herself. Magical realism, read this way, does not simply liberate Rani from patriarchal constraint; it is the very medium through which patriarchal society metabolizes, contains, and ultimately re-domesticates a female desire it could not otherwise accommodate at all.

Karnad, Márquez, Rushdie: A Comparative Note

Placing Nagamandala briefly beside two of the tradition's most canonical English-language touchstones sharpens what is distinctive about Karnad's use of the marvellous. In García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, magic operates chiefly at the level of national and historical allegory: the insomnia plague, the four years of rain, the massacre of banana-plantation workers whose deaths the official record subsequently erases from memory, all use the marvellous to register the otherwise unspeakable violences and amnesias of a national history. In Rushdie's Midnight's Children, the telepathic children born at the stroke of India's independence similarly yoke the magical to the fate of an emergent postcolonial nation, using individual bodies as vessels for collective historical experience. In both cases, the marvellous is oriented outward, toward the nation, the historical record, and collective memory.

Nagamandala, by contrast, keeps its magical realism resolutely domestic and interior. Its marvellous elements do not register a national trauma or a historical rupture; they register the far more intimate and, in a sense, far more universal fact of a single woman's confinement within a single household. Where Márquez and Rushdie use magic to make visible what official history suppresses, Karnad uses it to make visible what an ordinary marriage suppresses. This is not a lesser use of the mode but a differently scaled one, and it is arguably closer to the mode's oral, folkloric origins than either of its more frequently anthologized counterparts: the janapada katha from which Karnad draws was never in the business of allegorizing the nation-state, because the social unit it was designed to interrogate, indirectly and at a safe narrative distance, was always the household, the marriage, and the extended family. Karnad's achievement is to bring a narrative technology built for exactly that scale into conversation with an internationally recognized literary movement built, in its most famous instances, for a much larger one, without simply diminishing the technique in the process.

A brief widening of the comparison is instructive here as well. Within Indian English and Indian-language fiction more broadly, other writers working roughly contemporaneously with Karnad were arriving at similarly domesticated uses of the marvellous from their own directions: the folk-inflected, often brutal magical registers of Mahasweta Devi's fiction, translated and championed by Gayatri Spivak, likewise refuse to let the marvellous drift into either pure allegory or pure decoration, keeping it tethered to the bodies of specific, historically situated women. Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, published a decade after Nagamandala, performs a related manoeuvre in prose, folding myth, taboo, and the quasi-magical logic of childhood perception into an unflinching account of caste and gendered violence within a single family. Karnad's play, appearing earlier than either and in a different medium, can accordingly be read not as an isolated experiment but as part of a broader, loosely contemporaneous tendency within late-twentieth-century Indian literature to relocate the marvellous from the scale of the nation to the scale of the household — a tendency for which Nagamandala remains one of the clearest and most formally economical theatrical instances.

Conclusion

Nagamandala's marvellous elements — the cobra who becomes a tender husband, the flames who narrate the frame, the personified Story who requires a cursed man's voice to exist at all — are not the ornamental folk colouring of an otherwise conventional domestic drama. They are the mechanism by which the play stages, and ultimately cannot fully resolve, the question of who is permitted to desire, to speak, and to be believed within a patriarchal marriage. Read through Wendy Faris's model of magical realism, Nagamandala satisfies the mode's formal criteria with unusual precision: an irreducible magical event, a scrupulously realistic surrounding world, a productive and sustained hesitation in the audience, a merging of the human and the animal, the legal and the sacred, and a quiet destabilization of what counts as a stable identity, since "Appanna" now names two beings at once. Yet the play's deepest debt is not to the Latin American Boom but to the Kannada oral tradition of women's storytelling from which its plot and its self-conscious frame narrative both derive, a tradition in which indirection was always already a technology for saying what could not otherwise be said. Karnad's particular achievement is to hold these two lineages together without collapsing one into the other, using an internationally legible critical vocabulary to make visible a specifically local and specifically gendered practice of narrative survival. What Nagamandala ultimately suggests about the political uses of the marvellous in postcolonial Indian drama is that magic, in such contexts, need not point outward toward the nation or backward toward suppressed history to do serious cultural work; it can instead point directly at the household, and ask, with total formal seriousness, whether a woman's desire has anywhere else at all to go. Future work might extend this reading to Karnad's Hayavadana, whose horse-headed protagonist fuses myth and psychological interiority in ways that would test and complicate the feminist framework developed here for Nagamandala.

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