

The Closed Door as Swaraj: Rani's Folk Feminism and the Politics of Privacy in *Nagamandala*

Sri. Panchadarla appalakonda

Ph. D. Research Scholar in English, Dr. B.R.Ambdkar Univsaity , Etcherla Srikakulam Andhra Pradesh, India, 532001.

Abstract—This article examines Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1988) as a feminist counter-text to the shastric tragedy of *Hayavadana* (1971). It argues that Rani's agency is constituted through folk form, architectural privacy, and oblique speech. Using Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*, Luce Irigaray's labial politics, and Michel Foucault's *Panopticon*, the study demonstrates that the locked room, initially a carceral space, becomes the site of female authorship. Rani's performative utterance "He is a god" rewrites *pativrata dharma* into *swaraj*. The anthill trial is analyzed as a folk courtroom where oral law defeats Manu-based law. The article concludes that Karnad's feminism here is not liberal but folk feminist: it weaponizes invisibility and orality to secure female sovereignty. The final closed door signifies privacy as the highest *dharma*, repositioning Karnad as a playwright who uses folk not for authenticity but as political technology.

Index Terms—Girish Karnad, *Nagamandala*, Folk Feminism, *Écriture Féminine*, *Panopticon*, *Pativrata Dharma*, Privacy, Oblique Agency, Indian Drama

I. INTRODUCTION: AFTER THE PYRE, THE CHAMBER.

Hayavadana ends with Padmini's sati, marking the limit of shastric law. *Nagamandala* begins where that tragedy ends: in the locked room where a woman must live. Written during the 1980s Indian women's movement, the play shifts Karnad's inquiry from "Can a woman speak in public?" to "Can a woman be private?" This article contends that Rani's survival is not miraculous but methodological. Karnad abandons the shastric myth of *Hayavadana* for folk myth to construct a grammar of resistance that succeeds through indirection. The central political object is the closed door: it transforms from prison to sanctuary to sovereignty.

II. THE PANOPTICON AND THE LOCKED ROOM.

Rani's married life begins as Foucault's Panopticon. Appanna locks her in daily, making her the observed object of an invisible gaze [Foucault 1995, 201]. The village functions as a decentralized surveillance network. Unlike Padmini's freedom in Dharmapura's streets, Rani is denied public space. Her silence is architecturally enforced. The pativrata ideal – woman as guardian of the house – is inverted: she is the guarded. Yet the Panopticon has a flaw: it cannot see at night. Karnad exploits this failure of light. The lock that imprisons by day becomes permeable by dark, creating the liminal zone where folk agency begins.

III. NAGA AS ÉCRITURE FÉMININE: WRITING WITH THE BODY.

Rani's resistance is born when she pours Kurudavva's love-root on the anthill. Naga drinks it and visits her as Appanna. This is not magic but Cixous' *écriture féminine* [Cixous 1976, 880]. Denied pen and paper, Rani writes with her body. The nocturnal encounters are reciprocal and pedagogical: Naga listens, teaches, and desires her as subject, not object. Her pregnancy is textual proof of this authorship. Where shastric law reads the female body as site of pollution and control, folk logic reads it as manuscript. Irigaray's "labial" model clarifies this: Rani's agency is multiple, fluid, and touch-based, not singular and phallic [Irigaray 1985, 24]. She authors a husband, a story, and a self in the dark.

IV. THE ANTHILL TRIAL: FOLK LAW VS. SHASTRIC LAW.

Discovered pregnant, Rani faces the village elders. Manusmriti mandates death for adultery [Doniger 1991, 8.352]. Rani refuses this shastric court and chooses the anthill – folk temple of the cobra-god. Her test – holding the cobra – is a performative speech act [Austin 1975, 6]. Saying "He is a god" does not describe Appanna; it creates him as god. The cobra's acceptance makes her a goddess to the village. This is Turner's liminal ritual: structure is inverted, *communitas* emerges, and folk orality defeats written law [Turner 1969, 95]. Kurudavva has already narrated the frame tale. The elders become audience, not judges. Rani wins because the law applied is female, oral, and mythic, not male, written, and shastric.

V. THE CLOSED DOOR: PRIVACY AS POLITICAL VICTORY.

The play's final gesture is Rani closing the door on Appanna. This is not reconciliation but *swaraj*. Padmini's sati restored shastric order through death. Rani's closed door establishes folk order through life. Her sovereignty is spatial: Woolf's "room of one's own" made literal [Woolf 1929, 4]. She claims the right to be unwatched, the right to exclude the public. This is Karnad's radical thesis: female freedom is not entry into the public sphere but control over the private

sphere. The door that began as Appanna's instrument of control ends as Rani's instrument of power. Privacy becomes the final dharma.

VI. CONCLUSION: KARNAD'S FOLK FEMINIST TURN

Nagamandala marks Karnad's evolution from liberal humanist to folk feminist. Hayavadana showed that direct resistance using shastric logic leads to martyrdom. Nagamandala proves that oblique resistance using folk logic leads to godhood. Rani succeeds because she has a room, uses silence, and speaks performatively. For contemporary India, facing digital surveillance and legal battles over privacy, Rani's closed door remains a potent political symbol. Karnad does not offer women the public square. He offers them the locked room – and the key.

REFERENCES

- [1] Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd ed., Harvard UP, 1975.
- [2] Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893.
- [3] Doniger, Wendy, translator. *The Laws of Manu*. Penguin Books, 1991.
- [4] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- [5] Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, Cornell UP, 1985.
- [6] Karnad, Girish. *Nagamandala: Play with a Cobra*. Oxford UP, 1990.
- [7] Ramanujan, A.K. *Folktales from India*. Pantheon Books, 1991.
- [8] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271-313.
- [9] Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Cornell UP, 1969.
- [10] Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt, 1929.