 CHAPTER III

GIRISH KARNAD

FROM ‘JOUISSANCE’ TO ‘LES JEUNNES NEES’: A STUDY OF
HAYAVADANA AND NAGAMANDALA

Rabindranath Tagore a major figure in the pre-independence Theatre was the subject of our feminist critical appraisal in the previous chapter. In this chapter the focus is on Girish Karnad who is not only the most outstanding and popular playwright of the Kannada stage, but a towering figure in contemporary Indian theatre. He has had a multi-faceted career. As an actor, director, playwright producing documentaries and television series, Karnad is a very significant and familiar presence on the Indian cultural scene. With the staging of his play Nagamandala in the Guthrie Theatre, U.S.A. in 1993 his stature has been considerably enhanced, for he is the first contemporary Indian writer to have achieved a major production in the West. Karnad has had considerable exposure to western literature and culture. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and had a close association with several Western writers and literary figures. Within India he has been holding very responsible positions. He served as the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India from 1974 to 1975 and as the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Academy from 1988 to 1993. His major plays - Yayati (1961) Tughlaq (1964) Hayavadana (1971) and Nagamandala (1988) - have not only been popular but are also taught at Universities. All these factors contribute to Karnad’s standing today as a powerful voice on the Indian cultural scene. It is very rewarding therefore to bring to his
works the searchlight of feminist literary criticism. Though reviews and comments on his works have appeared in several journals and newspapers, this leading playwright of India has not yet been studied with gender on the agenda.

One of the first things that strike the student of Kamad's plays is his manipulation of myths in order to explore contemporary reality. He certainly belongs to that generation of writers who have been brought under the spell of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *Waste land*, two works that use myth to "strike a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity". It is not difficult to see why Karnad has been drawn to this method, for he belongs to a culture that is rich in myths and folk-lore. His talents conferred on the Kannada stage a richness and a depth that it had lacked before. Karnad has admitted that "whatever I write is essentially for the urban audience".¹ To his urban viewers he gave a theatrical experience of unique flavour, by employing traditional narrative material, historical and mythical themes, and mime and stylized movements. Karnad's plays rely on realism of spirit and theme, but they do not come under naturalistic or realistic theatre. They are radically modern, and quite exciting in their daring introduction of folk motifs into the contemporary urban theatre.

In one of his interviews, Karnad has stated that he is incapable of inventing stories and that this is the reason why he is inclined to borrow themes from myths, folk literature, historical episodes and so on.² Certainly no one denies a playwright the right to use pre-existing sources, and no one stipulates originality or invention of plot as the most desirable quality in a
playwright. Shakespeare himself was no inventor of plots. But what matters is the sea-change that the borrowed stories undergo when subjected to the creative imagination of the writer. In that sea-change we may see not only the creativity, but also the world view, the philosophy that inspires the writer. Karnad gives to his borrowed tales a twist, an entirely new perspective. Highlighting the contemporary relevance of these old stories, Karnad, as it were, illustrates the 'presentness' of the past. Folk characters, mythical personages and historical figures, project in his plays the anguish and existential dilemmas of the contemporary men and women. It is in doing this that he shows his great understanding of and sympathy for the unarticulated needs of women. One of the recurring concerns in Karnad's plays is the search for completeness or totality of human experience. In this quest, Karnad projects the body as of prime importance. Turning aside from the traditional notions of woman as the object of desire and not the subject, Karnad gives a prominence to female sexuality that is unprecedented in Indian literature. While Tagore the mystic has acknowledged sexuality as an undeniable aspect of female experience, his women characters as we have seen often appear at home in the male domain of the ruler of a people or the martyr. Girish Karnad stands alone in focusing on that terrain of woman's experience which has remained practically unmentioned and unmentionable in Indian drama, the compelling force of female desire.

Karnad's very first play *Yayati* shows his concern with this subject. The story taken from the *Mahabharat* has been interpreted as a study on the theme of responsibility. Yayati, a King with many sons, suffers from premature old age -- the result of a curse for his adultery. Yayati, unable
to satisfy his young bride, turns to each of his sons to exchange his youth for the father's old age. Only the youngest, Puru, agrees, to take on a punishment he neither understands nor deserves. Puru's extraordinary filial love is lauded in the epic, which contains other stories of a similar sacrifice. Bhishma's vow of celibacy, to promote his father's sexual happiness is one of the most famous examples. However Girish Karnad questions the propriety and the rightness of such actions, praised and sung about for ages. This challenge to an established, and venerated tradition is done through the female perspective. Suppose the young son of Yayati had a wife of his own. How would his sacrifice to oblige his father, affect the happiness of Puru's wife? Or would she not have a right to be happy? Would she be satisfied, yoked to a husband turned old man far too prematurely? In Karnad's view Puru's embracing of his father's punishment would not be anything praiseworthy. Instead it would be a surrender of responsibility.

In his next two plays Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala Karnad turns to this theme of female sexuality more explicitly. In fact female sexuality is at the centre of the two plays and Karnad's attitude to it is a far cry from the "given" attitude of Indian orthodoxy to the subject. Yet it is a curious fact that criticism of Karnad's plays has not come to grip with this fact. As we have already seen in our study of Tagore, the tendency to ignore or circumvent inconvenient or unpalatable aspects of a piece of writing is a characteristic of main stream criticism. Once again this is seen to operate in the case of the critics' attitude to Karnad. He is praised for his originality, his technique, for his daring innovations in the theatre, for his handling of myth and folk lore, but nothing has been said about the way he
projects the explosive theme of female sexuality. But feminist criticism cannot condone silences of this type. In an attempt to practice reading that is empowering we have to look carefully at works of literature and also their reception and expose gaps, omissions and silences in both with regard to female experience.

*Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* the two plays analysed in this chapter are both heroine-centered. The spotlight falls on them throughout, and the heroine of the former play at least appears to be the prime-mover of the action. It is her decision to find her happiness that sets its plot moving. In the latter the heroine though passive upto a point emerges triumphant and a great social force. The male characters move around the female protagonists in both plays and as the play ends, it is the women's personality that remains powerfully engraved on our imagination.

Karnad's play *Hayavadana* (1971) has as its central episode a tale from an ancient collection of tales called *Kathasaritsagara*. It is an episode which has intrigued the German writer Thomas Mann who has reworked the myth in *The Transposed Heads*. Karnad was familiar with *The Transposed Heads* and the influence of both sources can be discerned in *Hayavadana*.

*Kathasaritsagara* is in the form of a fascinating string of stories. Vetala a demon tells King Bikram stories which are not merely entertainers, but riddles and brain-teasers. The King is invited then to solve the riddle. The story that has inspired Karnad's play runs as follows: Prince
Dhavala, his wife Madana Sundari and her brother Swetapada travel together to the paternal home of the Princess. During this journey the trio visit a "Gouri" temple in the woods. In an irresistible and sudden fit of devotion Prince Dhavala offers his head as a sacrifice to goddess Parvathi. The frenzy of the Prince proves infectious, for Svetapata makes a similar sacrifice to the goddess by beheading himself. Stricken with grief Madana Sundari also tries to kill herself when the benevolent goddess intervenes and stops her. What is more, the goddess grants a boon to the Princess. She could ask the goddess for anything and it would be given to her. Madana Sundari asks for the lives of her husband and her brother. The goddess asks Madana Sundari to put the severed heads back on the bodies assuring her that life would return to them at once. In her excitement Madana Sundari fixes Dhavala's head on Svetapata's body and Svetapada's head on Dhavala's body. The goddess gives them life. Now comes Vetala's poser to King Bikram: which of the two men is Madana Sundari's husband? Bikram's answer which satisfies the questioner is that Dhavala's head with Svetapadi's body should be the husband. The reason given is that the head is the most important part of the body "Uttamanga" as it is called in Sanskrit - and controls the rest of the body. However this answer poses a moral problem, for the situation raises the question of incest.

Thomas Mann was fascinated by this story from India. He uses it as a vehicle for the expression of his favourite idea, namely the ironic confrontation between opposites in human life. Mann introduces minor changes to the story. His version goes like this. Sridaman, a Brahmin and Nanda, a cowherd and blacksmith are close friends. Sridaman falls in love
with Sita whom he happens to see while the two friends are travelling together. Nanda laughs at Sridaman, but agrees to act as messenger and takes his friend’s proposal to Sita. Sita accepts the proposal and marries Sridaman. A few months later the couple accompanied by Nanda travel together to visit Sita’s parents. They lose their way and stumble on a Kali temple. The two men kill themselves, exactly as the original story tells us. But of course the difference is important. The "other" man is not Sita’s brother, but her lover, already. When Sita is about to take her life the goddess stops her and asks her to fix the heads so that she can grant them their lives. Once again the heads are fixed wrongly and the question stands: who is Sita’s husband? The decision is in favour of Sridaman’s head. So we are told that Nanda’s head chooses to lead an ascetic’s life and retire to the forest. Sita enjoys the refinement of Sridaman’s head and the virility of what was once Nanda’s body. It would have been well had the story ended there. But Mann takes the story further. Developing the idea of the "uttamanga" or the best and most important organ, he shows how Sridaman’s head dictates to his new body and gradually confers on it refinement at the expense of its virility. Nanda’s head on the other hand, compels its body to toughen up and become virile.

Taking her infant son Sita goes in search of Nanda. She lives happily with him in a sylvan setting, till Sridaman arrives on the scene. The Gordian knot is cut when the friends kill each other in a duel. Sita commits ‘Sati’. Her death, she hopes, would confer on her son some respect. The child, named Andhak, meaning blind, grows up indifferent to passion, and becomes a purely intellectual being, with no trace of desire in him.
Karnad's *Hayavadana* follows the story line of Thomas Mann closely. Unlike the original Sanskrit tale, both these modern versions - Mann's and Karnad's - remove the implicit idea of incest. In both these adaptations, the second man is not a brother or a relative but a friend, and that too of lower social standing. Karnad stresses the socially inferior position of Kapila. He does not sit in the presence of Devadatta. When forced to sit down, he chooses to sit on the floor. He does not allow Devadatta to sit on the floor with him, but forces him to sit on the chair while Kapila keeps his place on the floor. This interesting bit of stage direction is meant to underscore the deliberate violation of taboos by the heroine Padmini. For her adultery crosses many boundaries.

Karnad traces the mutual sexual attraction between Padmini and Kapila. Though not learned at all he is better equipped than Devadatta to size up a woman and understand her nature. While acting as his friend's messenger he quickly realizes that Padmini and Devadatta are incompatible. Staring at her Kapila thinks:

Devadatta, my friend, I confess to you I'm feeling uneasy. You are a gentle soul. You can't bear a bitter word or an evil thought. But this one is as fast as lightning - and as sharp. She is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel.³

This is the first indication that we have of the trend of the story. The marriage takes place and very soon begins Devadatta's uneasiness over
Padmini's interest in Kapila. Unwilling to appear jealous and yet unable to control his growing pain he drops enough remarks to let us know what is happening. Padmini insists on Kapila being present even when Devadatta reads Bhasa's poetry to her. The husband in deep vexation bursts out that she "drools over Kapila all day" and that she "hops around him twittering 'Kapila! Kapila!' every minute". The conflict in him is clear. "Kapila is'nt merely a friend - he's like my brother", he says and denies that he is jealous. But when Padmini accuses him of lack of humour the confession is wrung out of him, "It's humour for you. But it burns my insides..."

It is against Devadatta's wishes that the trip to Ujjain is planned. The road is rough and Padmini's pregnancy causes a lot of anxiety to her husband. But Padmini remains well and happy. The journey affords enough opportunity for Padmini to take in Kapila's sexual attraction and Devadatta to understand the explosive nature of the situation. So when he visits the Kali temple alone, it seems quite an appropriate step to end his life, thus opting out of the "eternal triangle". Just before cutting off his head he whispers, "Good-bye, Kapila. Grood-bye, Padmini. May Lord Rudra bless you. You are two pieces of my heart - live happily together. I shall find my happiness in that."

Kapila leaving Padmini alone comes to look for Devadatta. Finding him dead Kapila cuts off his own head. His avowed motive is "I can't live without you. I can't breathe without you. Devadatta, my brother, my father, my friend...." The real motive, however is what goddess Kali later spells
out: "He must have known perfectly well he would be accused of killing Devadatta for Padmini".¹⁰

Padmini’s reaction to the death of her husband and the man who was well on his way to being her lover is very frank. To the goddess who has prevented her from killing herself Padmini asks,

Can there ever be anything you already don’t know Mother? The past and the future are mere specks in your palm. Then why didn’t you stop Devadatta when he came here? Why didn’t you stop Kapila? If you’d saved either of them, I would have been spared all this terror, this agony. Why did you wait so long?

It is in Padmini’s exchange of words with the goddess Kali that we have a hint that Padmini has contemplated an adulterous relationship with Kapila. She had earlier gazed at his virile body and spoken in an aside, "what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back - like an ocean with muscles rippling across it - and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless".¹² It is this knowledge of her secret desire that she attributes to the goddess. We have to take this fact into account when we follow the story further. Padmini is asked to put the heads back on the bodies so that the goddess can give life to Devadatta and Kapila. Padmini mixes up the heads - Devadatta’s head on Kapils’s body and Kapila’s head on Devadatta’s body. There is a certain ambiguity in this passage, which may be deliberate on the part of the playwright. The question arises, did Padmini interchange
the heads deliberately, so that she could have the best of both - her husband's refined and scholarly head and Kapila's sexually exciting body? The stage direction tells us, "eagerly, Padmini puts the heads - that is, the masks - back. But in her excitement she mixes them up so that Devadatta's mask goes to Kapila's body and vice versa". When the two men awake and all the three realize what has happened Padmini "running around in confusion" cries, "what have I done? What have I done? Mother Kali, only you can save me now - only you can help me - what have I done? What have I done? What should I do? Mother - Mother..." Strangely enough Kali, the benevolent goddess ignores this frantic supplication. The reason is suggested in the text. For a little earlier when Padmini mixed up and replaced the heads, the playwright made the goddess exclaims "in a resigned tone" - "My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty. Anyway - so be it". The unmistakable suggestion is that Kali had seen through the "Freudian" mistake of Padmini and had understood the erotic compulsions behind it.

After the excitement and laughter created by the confusion of identity, the serious issues emerge. Whose wife is Padmini now? She is quite happy to go with the man, who has her husband's head. Kapila speaks out her thoughts for her, "I know what you want Padmini. Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body". He is dead right and Padmini's eagerness to grasp the chance for total happiness makes her contemptuous to Kapila with Devadatta's body. "How can we get rid of this scoundrel? Let's go - let's go anywhere - to the woods - to the desert - anywhere you like", she tells the new Devadatta.
And this is what they do. Kapila, in turn goes to the Forest and lives alone. But the inexorable logic at work brings about another reversal. The head as *Uttamanga* controls and determines the nature of the body. Devadatta goes back to her old self and Padmini strugglest hard to control her disquiet and the stirring of longing within her. In an aside she asks, "What are you afraid of Devadatta? What does it matter that you are going soft again, that you are losing your muscles? I'm not going to be stupid again. Kapila's gone out of my life - forever. I won't let him come back again". But then her resolve is flung aside, overcome by the power of her desire. Padmini sends Devadatta to the fair in Ujjain and in his absence slips away to the forest with her child. She seeks out Kapila and notices that the head has won again, for Kapila is now with a face which fits his body. Kapila struggles with his own need for her. Tormented by "this mad dance of incompleteness" he cries out, "one beats the body into shape, but one can't beat away the memories in it... Memories of a touch- memories of a body swaying in these arms, ...memories which one cannot recognise, cannot understand, cannot even name because this head wasn't there when they happened...".

Padmini has no qualms at all in encouraging him to seek and achieve completeness by taking her. She argues that the erotic experience that the body once had should be known by the head also.

Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it. Shouldn't your head know what river it was, what swim? Your head too must submerge in that river - the flow must rumple your hair,
run its tongue in your ears and press your head to its bosom.

Until that's done, you'll continue to be incomplete.²⁰

The experience of completeness does not last long. Devadatta comes to the forest and the two men fight and kill each other. Padmini decides that she has lived long enough. She makes plans for her child's welfare and orders a large funeral pyre to be made for the three of them and commits "sati".

The sub-plot of the play is purely the invention of Karnad. It involves a strange creature half horse and half-man. Hence the name Hayavadana. What links the two plots is the motif of the quest for completeness. Also the two are linked by what may be termed abandoned children, one of them being Padmini's child and the other the half human being with the head of a horse. The idea of female sexuality also links the two. For Hayavadana's mother's story is told to us and it is a story reminiscent of the Greek myth of Phaedra who fell in love with a bull and from the union with it gave birth to the Minotaur. In Karnad's play we are told that a Princess of Karnataka fell madly in love with a white stallion to the dismay of the handsome Prince who rode the horse and sought her hand. The Princess marries the horse and after many years when the white stallion turns out to be a Prince who had been under a curse, the Princess regretted the transformation and went away leaving the child of the union, Hayavadana. This perhaps establishes a kind of mystical bond between him and the boy whom Padmini has abandoned. Hayavadana also goes to the Kali temple begging the goddess to make him a complete man. But the wholeness that
Kali confers on him is that of a horse. However one thing human remains in him, his laugh. Padmini’s child makes him laugh over and over again and some where along the live, the laughter turns into a proper neigh and Hayavadana is a complete horse with nothing human remaining in him. And Padmini’s son goes to his grand father - Devadatta’s father - riding a beautiful horse. Bhagavata, narrator and participant in the play gives thanks to the elephant headed Ganesha who has fulfilled the desires of all - "a grandson to a grand father, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse", Ganesha is appropriately the deity invoked in the beginning of the play, for as Bhagavata tells us," whichever way we look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness" But 'he is the Lord and Master of success and Perfection". And so the play begins and ends with homage to the Elephant-headed God.

What is one to make of this strange play which is at once fascinating and disturbing? There is no attempt at realism. In fact Karnad’s genius does not seem to be suited very much to the naturalistic theatre. What is the message that the playwright couches in this extraordinary mixture of the natural and the supernatural, folk elements and songs and miming? In his introduction to the play Kirtinath Kurikoti has touched on the comic vision embedded in the play. Commenting on Hayavadana’s transformation into a horse he writes: "The horseman’s search for completeness ends comically with his becoming a complete horse. The animal body triumphs over what is considered the best in men, the uttamanga, the human head". He seems to imply that this is a reflection on the main plot of Padmini and her two men, the suggestion being that the intellect and spirituality cannot
replace the claims of the body, the basic instincts like sexuality. This could be the reason why Karnad added the sub-plot of the horse-man, to the story borrowed from *Kathasarithsagara* and Thomas Mann. Thomas Mann himself had used the story to convey the ironic confrontation between opposites in human life, the opposed forces in his story being, the spirit represented by Sridaman, the Brahmin husband and the flesh symbolized by Nanda, the cowherd. In Mann's story Sita stands for the feminine principle. Elucidating the theme of his work Mann has written:

The world is not so made that spirit is fated to love only spirit and beauty only beauty. Indeed the very contrast between the two points out with a clarity at once intellectual and beautiful, that the world's goal is union, between spirit and beauty and bliss no longer divided, but whole and consummate. The fate of ours is but an illustration of failures and false starts attending the effort to reach the goal."

One can see this meaning embedded in Karnad's version too. If we want to isolate strands of signification in the play we could mention man's quest for his origins, the claims of friendship and love, the attractions of city life versus the beauty of the forest, innocence versus guilt, the primordial relation between man and woman, life versus death etc. But at the centre of it all lies the theme of the quest for completeness and this theme is amplified in the story of the female protagonist Padmini.
For a feminist reader, the portrayal of Padmini is of very great significance. There is nothing at all about her that conforms to Indian concept of femininity. Karnad projects a female character who is poles apart from the familiar heroines of Indian literature, classical and modern. Moreover Padmini repudiates many of the stereotypical notions of woman-hood entertained by patriarchal cultures anywhere. First of all Padmini gives the lie to the notion that woman is passive while man is active. She exhibits that quality which feminists today uphold as the most important, namely autonomy. She knows what she wants, and gets it, making decisions herself. Even in the beginning she inspires too much awe in Devadatta to make him confident about wooing her. When Kapila approaches her, we soon see who is in control of the situation. There is nothing of the bashful maiden about her and she is aggressive in her handling of Kapila. "Why are you gaping at me? What do you want?" When Kapila is confused, and tongue-tied Padmini rails at him, asking him if he is drunk, or insane, and finally threatens to take him to the police. Her boldness and wit make Kapila exclaim, "I'm finished - decimated powdered to dust powdered into tiny specks of flour". Later as a married woman she talks back to her husband and Devadatta finds it difficult to cope with her sharp tongue. We find Padmini, in a mood of mock remorse slapping herself on both cheeks in punishment, saying, "...I apologize. ...The trouble is I grew up saying these awful things and it's become a habit now." She has had, we can assume, a very liberal upbringing, no one curtailing her high spirits and her talkativeness. We hear Devadatta saying the truth, though smilingly, "Well, this bride didn't
blush", and Padmini replying "No one taught this bride to blush".\(^{28}\) She is
self-willed and strong, so strong that she has this complaint about her
husband, "But you are so fragile! I don't know how you're going to go
trough life wrapped in silk like this! You're still a baby..."\(^{29}\)

In marrying Devadatta Padmini follows social propriety, and fulfils
familial expectations. As Bhagavata tells us, "Padmini is the daughter of
the leading merchant in Dharmapuri. In her house, the very floor is swept
by the Goddess of Wealth. In Devadatta's house, they've the Goddess of
Learning for a maid. What could then possibly stand in the way of bringing
the families together?"\(^{30}\)

But a marriage like that applauded and blessed by the families does
not satisfy all of Padmini. Her awakened sexuality responds to the
powerfully built Kapila. She manipulates situations so that he is around a
great deal. Devadatta, as a result, complains that they are hardly together.
But whenever he says something, Padmini makes him feel so bad that he
cries out "why do you have to paint everything I say..."\(^{31}\) Padmini knows
what she wants, and she does not mind using guile to get it. She agrees to
cancel their trip to Ujjain with Kapila. She even tells her husband "When
Kapila comes, tell him I'm ill."\(^{32}\) The guileless Devadatta does precisely
that. Even that is stagemanaged by her. "There's Kapila now. You tell
him:"\(^{33}\) A significant stage direction tells us that "she pretends to go in, but
goes and stands in a corner of the stage, listening. Kapila enters excited." 
And then when Devadatta has delivered the pre-arranged excuses, Padmini
comes out all ready to go on the trip, as though nothing had been said about
cancelling it. Devadatta and Kapila are both flabbergasted, but Padmini is coolness itself. She can be "feminine" when she chooses with all the connotations attached to the word. To soothe Devadatta's justifiable anger she pleads, "please, don't be angry. Poor boy, he looked so lost and disappointed, I couldn't bear to see it." This maternal solicitude for the "boy" Kapila soon gives way to a sensuous appreciation of his virile body and its movements. "How beautifully you drive the cart, Kapila!" she exclaims. And in a thoroughly insensitive disregard of her husband's feelings, she recalls a disastrous journey when Devadatta drove the cart, and failed to control the oxen. When Kapila goes to get the Fortunate Lady's flower for her she fixes her gaze on his body and revels in its movements. "Before I could even say 'yes', he has taken off his shirt, pulled his dhoti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape. Such a broad back - like an ocean with muscles rippling across it - and then that small feminine waist which looks so helpless".

Devadatta notices her absorption, her silence, when, earlier she had been chattering away to impress Kapila. Padmini again muses, about Kapila, "He is like a Celestial Being reborn as a hunter... How his body sways, his limbs curve - it's a dance almost. ...No woman could resist him." Representation of woman as object of desire is all too common in literature and art, and feminists have raised their protest against this. One of the features of patriarchal culture that has been so injurious to the image of woman is the display of woman as the object of the male gaze of desire. In his *Three Essays on Sexuality* Freud has named the erotic pleasure derived from looking as scopophilia and has described it as one of the component
instincts of sexuality. Karnad reverses the situation, and makes the man
the object of desire, object of the erotic gaze. On the conventional stage
woman remains the object of gaze. The meaning of the sign woman on the
stage is created between the playwright and the audience and it is a sign
constructed for and by the male gaze, encoded with culturally determined
components of male sexual desire, perceiving woman as a sex object. What
Karnad does is to present on the stage a woman who does the desiring and
the gazing. It is an alternate perception of woman as erotic subject, and
woman's desire as an active empowering force. Such a daring violation of
the accepted notions of gender and representation of the erotic within the
frame work of patriarchy is unheard of in Indian writing. The dichotomy of
active/passive with the first term representing man and the other woman
is also exploded in the case of Padmini and Kapila. Here as in the case of
some of Bernard Shaw's women characters, the woman does the wooing, or
taking the initiative in an adulterous relationship and Kapila because of his
inferior caste and social position is unable to be the prime mover in the
relationship. Karnad does not invite the readers' or audience's
condemnation or judgement on Padmini. She is presented as amoral. The
choric utterance beginning "why should love stick to the sap of a simple
body?" seems to urge the exoneration of Padmini. It appears to be
articulating her point of view, "I have neither regret nor shame". It is
significant that neither Bhagavatha, the narrator, commentator, nor the
female chorus denounce her. Certainly the dramatist does not intend the
slightest condemnation of Padmini for her deliberate violation of the age-
old code of Pativrata that patriarchy has clamped upon Indian womanhood.
Some critics have seen Padmini as the embodiment of feminine energy and one critic links her to Shavian women by calling her the agent of the Life Force: Referring to Padmini's total abandonment to her sexuality and the pleasure derived from having the best of both worlds in Devadatta with Kapila's body Moutushi S. Chakravarthy writes:

Thus Padmini's sub-conscious wish is fulfilled and Kapila's body also finds pleasure as the joyous dance and amatory utterances of Devadatta (who has Kapila's body) and Padmini demonstrate.... If Padmini is a representation of the 'Life Force' or the erotic energy, it is, at any rate, should be, in her nature not to be a respecter of morals, for all energy works irrespective of ethical considerations.

When the chorus sums up Padmini's sexual life with two men or four men as she herself reckons, the metaphor of Nature is employed. "Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many petalled, many-flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?" It is a song that Padmini herself is said to have sung in the beginning of the play. Bhagavata sings a song rendered into prose thus: "Two friends there were - one mind, one heart. They saw a girl and forgot themselves. But they could not understand the song she sang." Why should love stick to the sap of a single body?... The song repeated towards the end of the play when Padmini's suicide is discussed, and it appears almost like a leitmotif of the
play, summing up Padmini's attitude to love and sexuality. Her sexual energy is not confined within the ideology of Pativrata. She, like Nature, stands for the plurality of the channels that desire runs through.

It is this riotous energy of Nature equated with female sexuality that has been dreaded by men in all cultures and institutions. And because it was dreaded, Patriarchy has developed methods of controlling it. The chastity belt devised by the crusaders of the middle ages to keep their women in check, the inhuman practice of female circumcision or genital mutilation practiced even today in some countries, the burning of widows institutionalized in India, the tonsure and other disfigurement and enforced invisibility of widows, and even the exaltation and near-deification of the mother at the expense of the woman in her are devices by which patriarchy has sought to keep under strict control the force of female sexuality. The Hindu sacred texts, as we have seen in the first chapter, declared this force dangerous unless it was kept within the controlling boundaries of marriage. Padmini breaks free from the boundaries thus prescribed and sanctified by religion and tradition, but the playwright does not castigate her for this.

Some critics view Padmini's story as a conflict between the head and the body. They argue that Padmini is essentially headless, for her existence is determined by her marriage and its consummation. In their opinion Karnad seems to be reinforcing the dichotomy of intellect and body and their association with man and woman respectively. This dichotomy, like many another binary opposition central to Western thought, has been
denounced by feminist theorists like Helene Cixous. There is little justification in the text for the view that Padmini stands for the body and the men for intellect. If anything, it is Padmini who has the greater decision-making power, and greater autonomy and intelligence than even Devadatta. If at all there is any dichotomous division of head and body in the play it is represented by Devadatta and Kapila.

A more discerning criticism of the play comes from an M.Phil dissertation on Girish Karnad written by Subhanghi Raykhar. She writes:

To me the theme of the play has two aspects - a socio-cultural aspect and a metaphysical one. At both levels it shows the conflict between the two polarities, (namely Apollonian and Dionysian) as the vital truth of human existence.... At the socio-cultural level the play suggests that the Apollonian always asserts itself and subdues the Dionysian in our socio-cultural life. So the existence of the two is ruled out... physically as well as morally. Human society is made possible only through submission to the Apollonian principle. The collective wisdom of society flouts passion... It will bring about the destruction of the individuals who defy order in society.44

Is Padmini’s Sati then to be viewed as submission to the Apollonian principle of order? Does she willingly go the way widows have gone in Indian culture? -meek and loving and eager to follow her husband even unto the embrace of death? If we subscribe to this view the difficulty naturally

arises,- whom did Padmini seek to join in death? Did she commit \textit{Sati} for Devadatta or for Kapila? The error of taking Padmini's death at face value as 'Sati' was brought home to me during my interview of Girish Karnad when he pointed out the absurdity of a woman committing \textit{Sati} for two men. Within the text itself there is some warning against taking this Sati idea seriously. It is Bhagavata who uses the word \textit{Sati} for Padmini. But when we read between the lines of what he says, irony makes itself felt.

Thus Padmini became a \textit{Sati}. India is known for its Pativratas - wives who dedicated their whole existence to the service of their husbands - but it would not be an exaggeration to say that no \textit{Pativrata} went in the way Padmini did.\footnote{45}

True enough, because no Pativrata sacrificed her life for two men - the husband and the lover. Moreover Bhagavata well knows that his description of Pativrata does not apply to Padmini - "wives who dedicated their whole existence to the service of their husbands". By no stretch of imagination can we see Padmini answering this description. Again Bhagavata repudiates his own words when he says "And yet no one knew the spot where she went \textit{Sati}."\footnote{46} In fact when a woman became a Sati, the place of her self- sacrifice would be exalted to the sanctity of a temple. People would throng to worship there. Why then does Karnad bring in the idea of \textit{Sati}? It is we feel his joke at the expense of the establishment that has gloried in such practices. It is, as it were, the continuation of the joke that Padmini attributes to the goddess when she says: "Kali, Mother of
Nature, you must have your joke even now. Other woman can die praying that they would get the same husband in all the lives to come. You haven't left me even that little consolation.  

Padmini certainly is not the type to make the final concession to patriarchal dictates. After making her deliberate choice to flout all the codes prescribed for the Hindu woman she would not conform meekly to the code about widows. Padmini as Karnad presents her is a self-willed, autonomous woman who will not give up anything that she badly wants just because society expects her to. Rather she is inclined even at the time of her death to trick society into promoting her plans. She is a great strategist, as is evident from her arrangements for her son just before her death.

My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in the forest and tell them it's Kapila's son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he's five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura. Tell him it's Devadatta's son.

There is nothing of the tragic and desolate widow about her. She is cool and calculating and it is her calculation that this is as good a moment to end the game as any. In fact the hunting tribe understand the spirit of her death when they identify Padmini with the "full-blossomed tree of the Fortunate Lady: we must not forget that even earlier in this play there was this association of the flower of the Fortunate Lady with Padmini. It is
ironic that it is Kapila who brings a whole load of this flower to Padmini and pours them out in front of her, and explains why the flower got its name. So when we are told that the tribals of the forests believe her to be the full-blossomed tree of the Fortunate Lady", it is her association with Kapila that is reinforced. This again rules out the reading that Padmini's suicide is a Sati for her husband. The fact then emerges that Karnad makes the Indian patriarchy's cherished idea of the Sati of a Pativrata stand on its head. The female protagonist of his play remain autonomous all her life and in death asserts this autonomy. Her action is the logical conclusion of the kind of life and free choices she has enjoyed so far.

A significant comment about the play and its characters is made by Karnad in his Author's Introduction to Three Plays. Talking about the use of masks in the play he says:

Since a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype, the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature. This is why characters in Hayavadana have no real names. The heroine is called Padmini after one of the six types into which Vatsyayana classified all women. Her husband is Devadatta, a formal mode of addressing a stranger. His friend is Kapila, simply 'the dark one'. Music - usually percussion - then further distances the action, placing it in the realm of the mythical and the elemental.49
Padmini's assertion of her choice and her defiance of conventional taboos on female sexuality are presented thus within the framework of myth. It is not in the naturalistic mode that the theme is presented. Karnad who admits of the influence of Brecht uses many technical devices in order to dispel the illusion of reality: there is the miming of the action, the introduction of Bhagavata who acts as narrator and yet is seen to interact with the characters, the introduction of the chorus and their comments on the characters and on the action that is going on, the two dolls that are endowed with the power of making caustic and shrewd comments etc. This blend of theatrical elements far removed from realistic drama was a convenient setting for the dramatist to present the heroine who is so utterly different from any representation of woman in Indian literature. Padmini who is autonomous and sexually liberated is presented to us through the mediation of myth and folk-tale. However the psychological realism of the characterisation is powerful enough to disturb and challenge accepted notions of femininity. Padmini, heroine of Hayavadana is the embodiment of female sexuality that Indian patriarchy has at once feared and condemned. That Karnad has placed such a woman at the centre stage is a landmark in the representation of woman in Indian culture.

A folkloristic scaffolding comes in handy for Karnad to hold up the theme of female sexuality in his next play Naga-Mandala. Here the form and the theme are blended in a more intimate way than in Hayavadana. Naga-Mandala yields far more to a feminist reading than the play discussed earlier. With regard to the origin of the play Karnad writes in his introduction to Three Plays,
Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales I heard from A.K. Ramanujam. These tales are narrated by women - normally the older women in the family - while children are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.¹⁰

Karnad's choice of a form so immediately related to women and their experience, enhances the feminist import of the theme. The theme once again is female sexuality and its suppression in Patriarchal culture. This theme is projected with a great deal of indirectness and lack of realism, and it is, as in Hayavadana distanced from the reader.

The play opens in the inner sanctum of a ruined temple, at right. A man struggling with sleep explains to the audience, his predicament. Unless he can keep awake the whole night he will die. This, they are told, is his punishment for having written plays that were staged causing misery to people. "You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that amused mass of sleep has turned against you and become the Curse of Death."¹¹

He hears female voices outside the temple and sees 'several Flames enter the temple, giggling, talking to each other in female voices.' He learns from their talk that this congregation of the flames is a regular occurrence.
A New Flame, arriving late captures everybody's attention by talking about what happened in her house.

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. This afternoon the old woman took her usual nap after lunch and started snoring. The moment her mouth opened, the story and the song jumped out and hid in the attic. At night, when the old man had gone to sleep, the story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari."

Breaking out of all constraint the story has reached the temple. As her presence is revealed the doomed Man grabs her wrist and forces her to a narration that, he hopes, will keep him awake all night and save his life.

It is in this non-naturalistic context that the story of *Naga-Mandala* is partly narrated and partly acted out. Story is the narrator who, introduces the characters and launches the action and still steps in occasionally to explain something or other, even interacts with the characters. Central to the plot is the young girl. "A young girl. Her name ... it doesn't matter". But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani, 'Queen'."In naming other characters also there is this tendency to have representational names. About Rani's husband Story says, "His
name was - well any common name will do^84 and so the name Appanna is given. The two minor characters are Kurudavva meaning a blind woman and her fair-skinned son ironically called Kappanna or the black one. Rani is kept locked up in his house by Appanna who does not bother to conceal his contempt for her. In spite of her beauty she hardly arouses any interest in him. We learn that he spends his nights with his concubine. A magic potion which on Kurudavva's advice Rani prepares for her husband is not given at the last minute, but poured into an ant-hill in which a King Cobra lives. While Appanna ignores his bride and goes away, the cobra comes to her at night, and as cobras can assume what shape they want he visits Rani in her bedroom in the guise of Appanna. So Rani's tearful lonely nights are turned into nights of love. She cannot reconcile the two appearances of her husband - cruel and indifferent during day time but full of ardour and tenderness at night. She accepts the condition imposed on her by her husband of the night - Naga as he is called in the play - that she should not ask any questions, but simply accept things as they are. Rani's mind, full of questions, accepts the puzzle. But things come to a crisis soon. Rani is pregnant. One night she tells her "husband" about her condition and she is shocked at his reaction. Far from the jubilation that she expected to see, there is silence and sadness. Rani is puzzled. But in the day time when Appanna cannot help noticing her swollen stomach he beats her and abuses her and threatens to expose her to the village Elders as a whore. That night Naga tells Rani how to face this great crisis. She must take the snake ordeal - that is, she should put her hand into the ant-hill and pull out the
cobra and swear that she has not known any male other than her husband and the cobra. The ordeal goes exactly as Naga has advised her. The Elders and the common villagers are astounded when, instead of biting her the cobra curls itself around her neck and spreads its hood over her. Rani's divinity is at once established. The villagers rush to fall at her feet. Even the concubine of her husband is among the crowd that prostrates before her. Appanna is dazed and uncomprehending but accepts the advice of the Elders that he should spend the rest of his life in her service. "Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly", they tell him. "That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world". He falls at Rani's feet and asks for forgiveness. But within him there is the misery of non-comprehension. "What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife". But Rani's life has changed completely. She has everything at once - a loving husband, a maid - her former rival - who is working to slave for her, and the adoration of the community, also her son.

The story has two alternate endings. In one Naga is shown as desperately sad and jealous to see Rani in the arms of her husband Appanna. Feeling that both his venom and his magic have been drained away from him Naga commits suicide by creeping as a snake into Rani's tresses and strangling himself. Rani feels the heaviness of her head and while Appanna combs out her hair for her the dead snake falls down. Rani's request that her son should light the fire for a ritual cremation of this
snake, and then perform the rituals every year to commemorate its death appears strange to Appanna. For what she is asking for is something that a son does for his father. However he agrees to her wish "There is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out". As Appanna goes out Rani picks up the dead snake and presses it to her cheeks.

This conclusion is declared unsatisfactory by the Flames who suggest their own happier ending to it. According to this Naga visits Rani again while she is with her husband and hides in her hair. Rani finding her hair heavy makes Appanna comb it. The snake falls down, and while Appanna runs out to fetch a stick to kill it Rani quickly urges the cobra to get back into her hair and hide there. She tells her husband that the snake has gone towards the bathroom. Alone with the Cobra Rani pats her hair saying, "This hair is the symbols of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily for ever". The narrator, Story is gone and the Flames too have disappeared by now, and as the play ends we are back in the inner sanctum of the temple. The Man has survived his fateful night having been kept awake by the play. He bows to the audience and leaves.

The originality of the play, its simplicity and brilliance of conception, are undeniable and have made Naga-Mandala a great event in Indian theatrical history. But what we are concerned about here is the portrayal of the heroine, with the focus on her sex-life. Rani is at first presented as
a typical village girl, beautiful and innocent and over-protected. Married at a tender age, she lives with her parents - sleeping between them - till she comes of age and is taken by her husband to his home. But there no bridal experience awaits her. She is locked up and deserted and as Kurudavva learns, the marriage is not consummated. Rani cries her heart out, consoles herself by day-dreaming. She talks to herself and makes believe that her parents are with her. She escapes from her misery on wings of fantasy. Sometimes she imagines that a prince comes for her in the form of a golden stag, sometimes it is a big whale that comes to rescue her from the flooded castle in which the demon has locked her up. There is something very pathetic about this young thing neglected and abused finding consolation in make-believe of romance and deliverance. But all this changes quickly. Naga's visits transform the nervous shy girl into a mature woman of a deep and rich sensuousness. Believing Naga's amorous advances to be something bad, something to be ashamed of, Rani asks naively at first, "What will Father and Mother say if they come to know"59 But soon she blossoms out into a woman who can respond to him with ardour. In fact she soon comes to feel and understand the intensity of her desire for her nocturnal husband. Waiting impatiently for him Rani exclaims, "There it is The smell of the blossoming, nightqueen. How it fills the house before he comes! How it welcomes him. God, how it takes me, sets each fibre in me on fire!"60 That she is a woman of deep passion is made known to us by Naga's anguished recollection after he has lost her: "Rani! My Queen...in another
man’s arms? ... Does she curl around him as passionately every night now? And dig her nails into his back? Bite his lips?  

Rani, as the play begins is the typical victim of patriarchal oppression. Naive and simple she accepts this oppression as her lot. Sexually repressed, physically locked up by her husband, Rani is unable or unwilling even to complain about her husband’s visit to his concubine. She has been taught the code that Indian patriarchy prescribes for women, and having interiorized all of it she is willing to suffer mutely. She is at first afraid of her own sexuality but finally surrenders to and glories in it. How are we the readers or audiences to accept the fact that Rani is quite unperturbed by what appears to be the schizoid nature of her husband? The dramatist provides internal explanation for this - Rani is told by Naga that she has to accept certain things unquestioningly. She can, with some show of spirit, follow his advice, ”Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you”  

Though she does not ask questions she has difficulty in reconciling the two images - nocturnal and diurnal - of her husband: ”Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night”.

Would it be too difficult for Rani to come to terms with this kind of split in the personality of what she believes to be her husband? Girish Karnad would emphatically deny this. In the introduction to Three Plays he writes:
The position of Rani in the story of *Naga-Mandala*... can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles - as a stranger during the day and as lover at night. Inevitably the pattern of relationship she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of fiction. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into.⁶⁴

Karnad's conception of Rani is as a "lived counter-point to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions."⁶⁵ In his interview with Aparna Dharwardkar Karnad stresses the idea that Rani's experiencing and accepting the seeming duality of her husband's nature is not unbelievable or improbable.

...the story on which *Naga-Mandala* is based could be seen as the Indian woman's perception of her husband's behaviour within the joint family frame work. She sees him during the day, and he is simply overbearing. Then he comes as a lover at night and there's no connection between the two. She has to invent all connections, you know, to make him the same person.⁶⁶

Does Rani absolutely believe that the ardent lover of the night and the rude brute of a husband by day are the same person? The question is
left unanswered. For there is considerable ambiguity in the situation. In certain significant comments made by Story we discern the possibility that Rani could be aware of a different identity for the person who visits her at night. The Cobra's confrontation with the vicious-looking dog Appanna has brought to ward off visitors to his wife, has resulted in Naga being slightly wounded. Rani sees and feels his 'cold blood'. But the next day when Appanna goes away after his brief visit Rani muses bewildered, "But last night he had blood on his cheeks and shoulders. Now \(^{107}\) The same doubts return strengthened when the fight with the mongoose leaves wounds on Naga. This time it is Story that alerts us to Rani's perception of the puzzle. "She applied her ointment to the wounds, tended him. But she never questioned him about them. It was enough that he had returned. Needless to say, when her husband came during the day, there were no scars on him" \(^{68}\) When the snake ordeal is over and Rani is exalted and the Flames assert that she lived with her husband happily ever after, Story opens up the possibility of her knowing for sure that there were two distinct men involved in her life.

No two men make love alike. And that night of the Village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even of She hadn't known earlier? \(^{69}\) (emphasis added)
Rani, we feel, must have known earlier. When Naga briefs her on the snake ordeal, with intuition she asks him "And suppose what I think is the truth turns out to be false?" When he disappears that night she runs to the door and cries "But the door...I had locked it from inside. And it is still locked."

If Rani had the suspicion that someone other than her husband was visiting her should she not have, as a Pativrata, verified the truth and banished the stranger from her bed? Karnad would not make his heroine do so. His implicit theme is the empowerment of a woman by the sheer force of her sexuality that is fulfilled. The stages of her growth and transformation are clear. The untouched child is at first frightened and embarrassed by her lover's sexual advances. Then she is roused and fulfilled and her personality and her position change. She, is bold and determined and can compel even the Elders to listen to her and let her have her way about the ordeal. And after the ordeal, of course, she is deified. Everything changes. She has a happy home, love of the husband, veneration of the community. She emerges literally as a "New woman" and a powerful moving force in society. The transformation comes as a result of Naga exalting her to an equal partnership in love, and elevates her to personhood', from the status of a chattel that Appanna had granted her.

A critic tracing the development of Rani suggests that she has passed beyond desire and fulfilment of desire to what may be termed
transcendence. He speaks of her as having gone through *Kama* (lust) and *Prema* (love) to a desire for *Kshema* or welfare.\(^2\) It would not be out of place to mention here briefly some of the philosophical concepts that could serve as a background for this kind of empowerment and transformation of Rani. In the Tantric system the serpent which represents desire also stands for a powerful spiritual force in human beings. A tremendous amount of spiritual energy lies concentrated in the form of a small serpent coiled in the spine of human beings. When a person is spiritually awakened this power moves upward and finally reaches the head, after which the person becomes enlightened and gains "Nirvana" Once the serpent power reaches the head the person becomes heavy with a great energy and vitality.\(^3\) The title of the play also yields significance in the light of the Tantric concepts. "Mandala" is a term indicating ‘inner concentration’. ‘Naga- Mandala’ loosely translated would mean "under the spell of the Naga" Rani who is under the spell of the Naga attains enlightenment. According to Hindu belief "Kundalini" or Serpent power which is hidden deep in the human psyche, when awakened leads to Nirvana or enlightenment.

Rani's transformation brings about an immediate change in the alignment of power in the family. Appanna is a changed man and the concubine now becomes almost a devoted slave of Rani. The idea that woman's empowerment is a threat to family life is repudiated here. Rather the implicit suggestion is that for the welfare of the family as well as the community women have to be empowered, and no woman is empowered
whose sexuality is repressed or frustrated. One of the loose-ends of the story is that of Kurudavva's son Kappanna who disappears unaccountably, leaving his blind mother distraught with grief calling for him. Earlier there are one or two hints of a disturbing female presence glimpsed occasionally by Kappanna. The female presence is implied to be supernatural and moved by desire for the strong-bodied young man. Kurudavva shares with Rani her fear for her son:

"When he tried to tell me I didn't listen. I was deaf. A temptress from beyond? A Yaksha woman - Perhaps a snake woman? But not a human being. No, what woman would come inside our house at that hour? And how? She wasn't even breathing. I shouted: 'Who are you? What do you want from us? What do you want from us? Go away!' Suddenly the door burst open. The rushing wind shook the rafters. He slipped from my hands and was one. Never came back."74

Why is this anecdote introduced? It does not enhance the plot in any way and seems to hang loose. But Kurudavva's words seem to give Rani some insight into the reality of her own experience. For she asks herself the very penetrating question: "Do desires really reach out from some world beyond night into our beds?"75 It is interesting to speculate why Karnad should have complemented the story of the sexual awakening of a woman with the popular belief of a Yakshi, a supernatural woman driven by desire
for a human male. Perhaps he wanted to situate the theme of female sexuality entirely in the realm of folk-tale and myths, distancing it. Has the playwright been warding off criticism from an orthodox society stirred to hostility? It is not likely because Karnad has been very outspoken about his interest in the theme of female sexuality. In an interview given to Aparna Dharwadker he speaks about his heroines, and their transformation through their gratified sexuality. To a question whether the fulfilment of desire does not lead to aggressiveness and discontent in them, Karnad replied,

Power, yes. But not aggressiveness and discontent. By Padmini was actually based on a woman I knew at that time. She was a quiet, devoted housewife until she had an extra marital affair, then she just blossomed: as an actrese, as a social worker, as a human being. Incidentally, neither Padmini nor Rani accepts ‘the exchange of bodies between the men passively. Padmini fights for what she wants, Rani is watchful and guarded, careful not to burst the bubble. They are both alert. Satyadev Dubey says that I’m the only playwright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically.76

This is true indeed. And even of we take non-dramatic literature of India, there is only one other writer Kamala Das - who has presented the
legitimacy of female desire through her powerful writings. Karnad's preference for the folkloristic motifs is then a matter of temperament. His is essentially a mythopoeic sensibility and his theatre is anti-realistic with its miming, stylized movements, narrator-participant and so on. But Karnad was using folk-tales also for their subversive power. He was very much indebted to his friend the scholar, linguist and translator A.K. Ramanujan for this insight. In the interview quoted above Karnad remarked, "Ramanujam makes the point that folk tales often subvert patriarchal values". In the introduction to his work *Folk tales from India* Ramanujan has stated that

The women in these tales contrast sharply with women like Sita in the epics who represent the ideal of the chaste unquestioning wife who follows her husband like a shadow and suffers all the way. They are analogous to the Dark Goddess in Hindu myth. When the gods are unable to destroy the buffalo demon, they resort to a female figure who has all the powers...  

Karnad was also familiar with the similar power of folk-theatre. In his introduction to *Three Plays* he has said, "The energy of the folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their heads".  

Certainly folk-culture represents women as human beings, and is faithful to the lived reality of women’s experiences. Folk-culture has no use for the dominant culture’s polarised representation of women as either Devi or demon, goddess or vampire. The sub-culture recognizes the real nature of women and represents them as having autonomy, power and sexual freedom. Karnad’s resorting to anti-realistic, folk-loristic theatre must therefore be out of a desire to explore more fully and freely the theme of female desire than naturalistic theatre would have enabled him. In both the plays discussed in the chapter we find that the legitimacy and force of female desire is recognized.

They also serve as an attack against the double-standard of society that permits a man to have extra-marital affairs while a woman has the concept of *Pativrata* clamped on her. Rani is beaten and humiliated for a crime which Apparna commits with impunity. Even if Rani were knowingly and deliberately adulterous she would not be a greater sinner than her callous husband. But Appanna like most males reserves the right to philandering, for themselves. As far Padmini she refuses to submit to patriarchal values and takes the law into her own hands, defying the culture codes of her society.

We cannot conclude this chapter without referring to certain remarks made by Karnad about his own family and its influence on his perception of women. Though this thesis does not resort to biographical criticism as such, it is relevant to recall Karnad’s revealing statements in his interview with Dharwadkar where he said that his own mother served him as a model
of his female characters. He described his mother as a full-blooded and daring woman who flouted conventions, social taboos and caste barriers to live with the man who became Karnad's father -

I was nearly fifteen when I discovered that both my parents had been married before that. In fact my mother had been widowed when she was only nineteen. Yet-in those days Brahmin widows used to have their heads shaved off and were kept confined to the kitchen so that they wouldn't get into trouble. But my mother showed extraordinary pluck and became a nurse. That's how she met my father, who had an ailing wife. After a few years of living together (I presume) they got married, and we were born. All this was kept a secret from us until we were in our teens. Can you imagine, there's middle class propriety for you! I suppose this late revelation made me aware that my mother was human, had human desires. 79

Certainly the deviant nature of his family in the midst of strict orthodoxy helped the formation of feminist sympathy in Karnad. He certainly was aware of feminist ideas disseminated across the country from the West, when he wrote his plays. In an article in The Hindu magazine supplement Karnad has remarked that "Feminism has carried politics into homes". 80 When I interviewed him he admitted to being well aware of contemporary feminist thoughts at the centre of which lies woman's right to her body and her sexual and reproductive drives.
Feminists, particularly French feminists have given prominence to desire in their theories of feminism. In their opinion female sexuality is a dark, untapped continent from which women should draw a tremendous lot of power and capacity for self-expression. It is interesting in this context to emphasize yet another important contribution that *Naga-Mandala* makes to the feminist cause. Karnad has emphasized the need for women to find their own voice. His play is a challenge to women to come out of their silence and to gather together and become articulate. The gathering of the flames is a very original and beautiful expression of this idea. The flame has always been metaphorically linked to the human tongue and hence the running away of the flames to their own private gathering is reminiscent of women fleeing from patriarchal authority to form their own supportive and sharing groups.

In a notoriously patriarchal culture where woman is silenced and denied every form of self expression, Karnad powerfully projects the need for a new utterance. In *Naga-Mandala* the opening scene unfolds a string of significance. First of all it high lights the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general. They have, as Karnad has pointed out in his introduction, 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. Seen thus, the status of a tale becomes akin to that of a daughter, for traditionally a daughter too is not meant to be passed on. This identity adds poignant and ironic undertones to the relationship of the teller to the tales. So there is a happy blend of the theme of the play and the very vehicle it is framed in,
so that gender awareness is ascribed in the play in a way that is seldom found in the theatre. The tales narrated by the flames denote the stories of personal lives of women, their suppressed desire, their ideals, aspirations and hopes which never get recognition in a dominant cultural tradition. Feminist historians of literature and culture have pointed out that whenever women have attempted to give utterance to their emotions or their experience, patriarchy has relentlessly suppressed it. This suppression has taken diverse forms in different cultures. Dale Spender, in her well-researched work *Mothers of the Novel* has documented the existence of a vibrant tradition of women novelists in England before Jane Austen wrote her novels. The hundreds of unpublished works by these women pushed into oblivion illustrate the highly organised conspiracy of male chauvinism against women's voices becoming articulate and heard. Literary genres like the letters and the diary and the epistolary form of the novel so eminently suited to the genius of women have been denigrated and kept out of the canonical forms. In the face of such calculated suppression, women's thoughts and words assume the subversive form of oral tales. Karnad suggests that if one were to explore folk tradition one would uncover many new forms through which the marginalized groups have sought to project themselves.

It is not far-fetched to perceive in the congregation of the flames in *Naga-Mandala* a symbolic representation of women's consciousness-raising groups such as were immensely popular and successful in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement. The escape of the story in the form of
a young woman from the old woman's house, through the old man's room, causing a furore in the family is paradigmatic of the situation of modern Indian woman trying to emancipate herself from the prison of patriarchy. In a beautiful imagery Karnad presents the flames extinguished in various households, sneaking away to come together. These flame are women and their rights, their hopes, their voices. One of the flames comes up with the tale of her mistress choking to death a story and a song until these two make a daring escape and are privileged to entertain an audience including a man whose life is in danger for a whole might. For this liberated story and the song are the tellers of women's tales, they are the voice so long silenced, of female narrative, a new utterance of women. It is quite legitimate to see Karnad as urging women to produce a literature of their own—a literature that is quite different from the main stream literature penned by male chauvinistic writers full of sexist bias and fictionalized projections of misogyny. Women today have already started examining the tradition of women's writing and Elaine Showalter's term "Gyno critic" applies to this branch of literary investigation. French Feminists like Helene Cixous have gone further and are asking that women bring their sexuality to their writing. They are eloquently clamouring for women to 'write their body' Karnad denied having been influenced by French feminism, but he has certainly upheld the need for a female tradition of letters, where woman can show herself as she is and not be created in the image of a male fantasy of her either out of desire or terror.
The foregoing study of *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* establishes the fact that Girish Karnad is much more than a feminist-in-sympathy in the Indian theatre. He has definitely taken up patriarchy for attack and his attack falls on a very pernicious aspect of the system - its attitude to female sexuality. Indian culture is ruthlessly harsh to women who try to assert their sexuality. A country noted for its hypocrisy and double standard, India has always valorized the concept of pleasure, especially sexual pleasure. It is pertinent to recall here that no other ancient culture has given the world an elaborate treatise on sexuality like *Kamasutra*. But when we read this Indian classic we will find that it has nothing to say about female desire. The book is all meant for the *Nagarik*, the male citizen in his pursuit of sexual pleasure. Woman serves as the object of male sexual desire and a woman who enjoys pleasure apart from the desire for procreation is labelled a yakshi or demon. All Indian literature and cultural representation have toed this line. Hence it is a tremendous "difference" that one observes in the plays of Karnad, where woman is the subject who claims a right to have sexual pleasure. One is reminded again of French feminists who have recently focused their theories on "Jouissance" a term that refers to sexual pleasure, and also denotes a state of blissful and ecstatic union which would complete women. In the plays of Karnad the heroines are shown to experience this *Jouissance* and thereby experience self-realization and fulfilment. In fact they are born again; they are "les jeunnes nees" the female subjects born, or re-born from an old repressed self.
END NOTES

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