



WHEN STORIES BECOME CHARACTERS: NARRATIVE AGENCY, PERFORMATIVITY AND META- THEATRICALITY IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAY NAGAMANDALA

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's play Nagamandala (1988) has been widely studied through feminist, psychoanalytic and folkloristic perspectives. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the play's unique theorization of storytelling itself. This paper argues that Nagamandala transforms storytelling from a narrative technique into an autonomous dramatic force by granting stories agency, voice, and performativity. Rather than functioning as passive containers of events, stories in the play become active participants that shape human relationships, construct reality and determine the movement of the dramatic action. The paper examines how Karnad destabilizes conventional distinctions between the narrator, narrative, character and audience. Through the anthropomorphized Story, the community of Flames and the layered frame narrative, Nagamandala foregrounds storytelling as a performative act that continually recreates itself through retelling. The play rejects textual fixity and privileges the fluidity characteristic of oral traditions, where meaning emerges through performance rather than the creator's authority. The paper demonstrates that Nagamandala is not merely a dramatic adaptation of folklore but a meta-theatrical meditation on the life of stories themselves. It concludes that Karnad conceives narrative as a living cultural process in which stories survive through performance, transformation and collective memory rather than through textual permanence.

Keywords

Narrative Agency, Storytelling, Performativity, Metateatre, etc.

Full Article

Girish Karnad's play *Nagamandala* (1988) occupies a distinctive position in modern Indian drama because of the unique way in which it uses self-reflexivity and meta-theatrical devices. It looks at drama as a part and parcel of the narratives transmitted orally. The dramatist is first and foremost a storyteller situated firmly within the oral storytelling tradition who is entrusted with the responsibility of entertaining the audience by putting up a performance. The play therefore foregrounds the very processes through which stories are created, transmitted, performed, transformed and received. Drawing upon the resources from Indian folklore and oral storytelling, it explores the structural possibilities of modern drama. The present paper will look at three major devices by which this is achieved. Firstly, the play confers the narrative agency on the Story itself who transforms into a female storyteller. She is the one who takes over the control of the play, unsettles the conventional authority of the playwright and decides the trajectory of the characters and their actions. Secondly, the play represents a movement from telling to showing. The story is transformed from a mere narrative to a performative act thereby drawing attention to its performativity. Lastly, the play employs a number of meta-theatrical devices by which it repeatedly draws attention to itself blurring the line between the performers and the audience.



Through a detailed analysis of the above aspects, this paper argues that *Nagamandala* transforms storytelling from a narrative technique into an autonomous dramatic force.

Narrative Agency and the Unsettling of the Playwright's Authority:

The most radical dramatic device in *Nagamandala* occurs even before Rani's play begins. Karnad does not introduce the central narrative through an anonymous narrator or a conventional *Sutradhara*. Instead, the Story itself is personified and enters the dramatic world as a female figure. This transformation is significant because it collapses the conventional distinction between what is narrated and by whom. Ordinarily, a story is an object possessed by the narrator: the narrator controls it from beginning to end. In *Nagamandala*, however, this hierarchy is reversed. The Story becomes an embodied subject that possesses its own desire to be heard.

The Prologue establishes this idea through the tale of an old woman who has kept a story and a song inside herself. Because they have been suppressed, they eventually escape from her. One of the Flames explains that the story and song were effectively “choked” inside the old woman before escaping (250). The metaphor of choking is crucial. A story is conventionally imagined as something that requires a human teller for its existence. Karnad reverses this relationship: the story itself possesses an impulse toward expression. It refuses to remain imprisoned within its human container. The Prologue also establishes storytelling as a communal act rather than an isolated act of individual authorship.

The Flame subsequently articulates the principle that underlies the entire play: “So if you try to gag one story, another happens” (251). This statement can be read as the first explicit formulation of narrative agency in the play. The verb *gag* implies an attempt to exercise power over speech—to silence, suppress or control the narrative. Yet the Story resists that attempt. It does not merely survive suppression; it generates another form of expression. Narrative therefore becomes something dynamic and self-propagating rather than passive. This is particularly significant in relation to Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse. Foucault argues that discourse is not simply an instrument through which power expresses itself; discourse is also a site through which power is exercised and contested. In *The History of Sexuality*, he famously observes that where there is power, there is resistance and that resistance is imminent within relations of power. The Story in *Nagamandala* can similarly be understood as a discursive force that refuses complete containment. The attempt to suppress it produces another narrative. Thus, the play's statement that “if you try to gag one story, another happens” can be interpreted as a poetics of resistance: silencing does not necessarily eliminate discourse but may generate alternative forms of narration.

The personification of the Story becomes even more important when it enters the stage as a woman. The stage direction identifies her simply as “THE STORY”, placing her alongside Rani, Appanna, the Naga, Kurudavva and the Flames as a dramatic entity rather than treating her as an invisible narrative device. The fact that the Story is personified as a woman and escapes from a woman and is listened to by the flames who are women situates the play firmly within the oral storytelling tradition which is generally considered to be a woman's domain. The act of storytelling thus becomes an act of resistance. The Story does not merely tell Rani's story; she negotiates the conditions under which the story will be told. She becomes an agent of narrative transmission. The Story's agency is also demonstrated through her insistence on being narrated. She is not a passive object waiting for someone to tell her. She actively seeks a listener. She is not simply an object produced once by an individual author but acquires life through circulation. Her survival depends upon its being heard and retold.

The most important evidence of narrative agency comes when the Story begins Rani's tale. The transition from prologue to the main narrative is not controlled by the playwright through an



invisible narratorial voice. Instead, the Story initiates the world of Rani. The opening establishes this mode: “A young girl. Her name—it does not matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani” (253). The Story chooses what matters and what does not. Thus, Rani's life does not simply happen on stage. It is selected, framed and organized by the Story.

An especially interesting development is that the Story's narrative agency is reproduced within Rani's consciousness. When Rani is isolated by Appanna, she constructs imaginative narratives about her own condition. She imagines herself within the conventional structure of a fairy tale: “So the demon locks her up in the castle. Then it rains for seven days. Then a big whale comes to Rani and says, ‘Come, Rani, let us go’” (263). Rani begins by being the object of someone else's story but gradually becomes a producer of stories herself. The Story tells Rani's story. Rani tells stories about Rani. The distinction between narrator and narrated subject consequently begins to collapse. Rani's storytelling gives imaginative form to her otherwise powerless existence. Her fantasy translates patriarchal confinement into the vocabulary of the fairy tale: husband becomes demon, confinement becomes castle and rescue becomes the arrival of the whale. Narrative consequently becomes a form of agency before it becomes social agency. Rani cannot initially change her physical circumstances, but she can alter the imaginative representation of those circumstances.

The Story in *Nagamandala* is not simply representational. It is productive. It does not merely tell us what happened to Rani. Its narration brings a particular dramatic world into existence.

Performativity: From Telling to Showing:

The second significant dimension of *Nagamandala* is its transformation of storytelling from a purely narrative activity into a performative act. Although the play begins with the apparently simple situation of a Man listening to a story, Karnad gradually disrupts the distinction between narration and enactment. The Story does not remain an invisible narrative voice that recounts events to the Man. She acquires a physical presence on stage, interacts with the other characters, gestures, instructs, reacts and participates in the unfolding of the narrative. Storytelling consequently becomes something that is not merely heard but seen. The transition from telling to showing is therefore central to Karnad's dramaturgy because the play repeatedly makes the process of narration visible to its audience.

The theatrical embodiment of the Story is the first important step in this transformation. Rather than allowing the Story to remain an abstract narrative category, Karnad personifies it as a woman who enters the stage and participates in the theatrical action. The distinction between the story and the storyteller consequently becomes unstable. The Story is simultaneously the object being narrated and the subject who narrates it. More importantly, she is a performer of her own narrative. Her insistence that she needs her “hands to act out the parts” (251) is particularly significant as it explicitly associates storytelling with performativity. The Story does not merely require a voice with which to recount events; she requires a body through which those events can be represented. The story becomes theatrical when it is embodied through gesture, movement and performance. This moment can be productively read through Richard Schechner's conception of performance. Schechner's understanding of performance extends beyond conventional theatre and includes ritual, storytelling, restored behaviour and other forms of embodied cultural action. Performance involves the re-enactment or reorganization of behaviour rather than merely its verbal description (Schechner, 2013).

Oral storytelling, a tradition on which Karnad draws upon, is rarely restricted to the spoken word. The storyteller's body, voice, facial expressions, gestures and interaction with listeners are integral to the process of narration. Karnad brings these characteristics oral storytelling into the



theatrical structure of *Nagamandala*. The Story's physical presence thus recalls the performative nature of folk storytelling while simultaneously drawing attention to the fact that the audience is watching a dramatic representation of storytelling. The relationship between the Story and the Man further intensifies this performative dimension. The Man, along with the flames, becomes an internal spectator within the play. He listens to the Story while the external audience watches both of them. This produces a layered structure of spectatorship in which the audience is made conscious of the act of watching someone listen to a story. A story requires a teller, listeners and a space of performance. Karnad makes this process visible by placing the storyteller, listeners and audience within the theatrical space itself. The theatrical situation therefore becomes self-reflexive. The play therefore occupies a productive space between oral narrative and modern theatre.

The Story's performative power is particularly evident when she intervenes directly in the actions of the characters. Her command to Rani, "Rani, put it in that ant-hill" (266), is not merely a piece of narration. It is an instruction that produces an action within the dramatic world. The Story therefore assumes something resembling the function of a director. Her words do not merely describe an event that has already occurred; they participate in bringing about the next stage of the narrative. When the Story instructs Rani, her speech functions simultaneously as narration and action. Her words intervene in the dramatic world. The Story therefore possesses what may be described as performative narrative agency: she does not merely represent the action but participates in its production.

The performative nature of the play is particularly striking in the characterization. Naga's assumption of Appanna's form is itself an act of performance. He appears as another person and is recognised by Rani through the signs associated with Appanna's identity. The distinction between being and performing consequently becomes unstable. Naga does not cease to be a snake, yet he successfully performs the role of Appanna within Rani's experience. His identity becomes dependent upon bodily appearance, behaviour and recognition. The theatrical device of transformation therefore becomes a means of exploring the relationship between performance and identity.

The movement from telling to showing in *Nagamandala* can therefore be understood as a movement from narrative representation to theatrical production. Karnad does not abandon narration in favour of enactment; rather, he makes narration itself theatrical. The Story's body, voice and gestures turn narrative into an embodied event, while her interventions transform speech into action. The crucial implication, therefore, is that Karnad's theatre does not simply tell the audience that stories possess power; it makes the audience experience that power through performance.

Metatheatricality and Self-Reflexivity in *Nagamandala*:

The third significant dimension of *Nagamandala* is its sustained use of metatheatrical devices through which the play draws attention to its own processes of storytelling and theatrical representation. The play does not permit the audience to remain completely immersed in the fictional world of Rani, Appanna and the Naga. Instead, it repeatedly exposes the mechanisms through which that world is created. The Story appears as a character, the Man becomes an internal spectator, the Flames function simultaneously as characters and audiences, the performance of the story becomes visible within the performance of the play, and the distinction between actor, character, narrator and spectator is repeatedly destabilized. Metatheatricality consequently becomes central to Karnad's dramaturgy because it enables the play to represent not only a story but also the process of creating, telling, performing and receiving that story.



Lionel Abel, who popularised the term “metatheatre” in his 1963 book, describes metatheatrical drama as theatre that turns the theatrical situation itself into an object of representation. In such drama, characters may become conscious of their roles, dramatic situations may resemble performances within performances, and the boundary between reality and theatrical illusion may be deliberately disturbed. *Nagamandala* repeatedly operates through precisely this kind of theatrical self-consciousness. The audience is encouraged to look simultaneously at the fictional events and at the theatrical mechanisms through which those events are presented.

The most obvious metatheatrical device is the personification of the Story creating a double theatrical structure. The audience is watching a play, but within that play another story is being performed. The Story becomes both a participant in the dramatic action and a commentator on the process through which that action is produced. This doubling is characteristic of metatheatre because the play becomes conscious of itself as theatre. The relationship between the Man and the Story creates another level of theatrical doubling. The Man is effectively an audience member within the play. He listens to the Story just as the external audience listens to and watches the performance. The Flames are also witnesses to the storytelling process. The audience is therefore encouraged to become conscious of its own position as spectator.

The play's use of the theatre-within-theatre structure becomes particularly significant when the Story narrates events that are subsequently enacted before the audience. The spectator first encounters an event through narration and then encounters it through performance. The same narrative material consequently exists at two levels: as something spoken and as something shown. This duplication foregrounds the relationship between narrative and theatre. The audience is therefore prevented from treating the dramatic action as an entirely autonomous reality.

The snake ordeal is also one of the most important metatheatrical moments in the play. It is simultaneously an event within the plot and a spectacle presented to spectators. Rani's body becomes an object of public viewing. The villagers gather to witness her action, and the external audience watches the villagers watching Rani. There are consequently two audiences operating simultaneously. The villagers are spectators within the fictional world, while the theatre audience becomes a spectator of those spectators. This produces a complex structure of theatrical spectatorship:

Moreover, the metatheatricity of *Nagamandala* is visible in the multiple endings offered by the play. Rather than offering a single, fixed conclusion, Karnad acknowledges that the ending of a story may change according to the expectations and demands of different audiences. This self-conscious manipulation of narrative closure draws attention to the constructed nature of storytelling and foregrounds the relationship between the storyteller, the story and the audience. The multiple endings therefore function as a metatheatrical device: the play not only tells a story but also invites the audience to reflect on how stories are shaped, performed and received.

The three dimensions of the present study therefore converge at this point. Narrative agency gives the Story control over narration; performativity transforms narration into embodied action; and metatheatricity makes the processes of narration and performance visible to the audience. The Story is not simply a narrator, because she performs. She is not simply a performer, because she controls the narrative. And she is not simply a character, because her presence continually draws attention to the theatrical structure within which the other characters exist. She occupies the unstable space between all three categories. In totality we can therefore say that Karnad conceives narrative as a living cultural process in which stories survive through performance, transformation and collective memory rather than through textual permanence.



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