

**TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES OF NARRATION: GIRISH KARNAD'S  
NAGAMANDALA-A POSTMODERN NARRATIVE**

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**Abstract:**

In the realm of narratology, there has always been a search for finding different ways of representation and expression. With the development of the novel, in the late nineteenth century, visual aspect of narration has taken the centre stage than the narrative aspect. This approach has its roots in enlightenment tradition. The modern realist convention is based on the assumption that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it. However, this approach has its limitations, because our senses can never give us a complete depiction. The 'real' of our perception has inherent inadequacies. The real has more than what we perceive through our senses. Fantastic and magical realism throws wide range of possibilities of depiction. This paper explores how Girish Karnad in his play *Nagamandala* employs fantastic and magical realism as tools of narration and adeptly sews one into the other creating a unique fabric of representation. His narration and dramaturgy passes seamlessly from one through the other.

**Key Words:** Fantastic; Magical realistic; postmodernism; modernism

**Introduction:**

In the realm of narratology, there has always been a search for finding different ways of representation and expression. With the development of the novel, in the late nineteenth century, visual aspect of narration has taken the centre stage than the narrative aspect. Catherine Belsey (1980) calls this as classical realism in which the narrative was expected to 'show' rather than 'tell' the reader an interpretation of reality (p. 68). This approach has its roots in enlightenment tradition. The modern realist convention is based on the assumption that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it (Watt, 1992).

However, this approach has its limitations, because our senses can never give us a complete depiction. The 'real' of our perception has inherent inadequacies. The real has more than what we perceive through our senses. To delve into the deeper and wider realms, one has to transgress and subvert the existing horizons of realism through alternative approaches to reality such as fantastic, magic realism or magical realism. Zamora and Faris (1995) considered 'magical realism as a mode suited to exploring...and transgressing...boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic' (p. 5).

In fact, magical realism has its roots in Post expressionistic magic realism which is a concept and a mode of representation introduced in painting in Europe. For the new art, it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world (Roh, 1995). Even Aristotle elucidates the dynamics of narratives and discusses the writer's approach to reality. He claims that it is better to convince the reader of the realism of something impossible rather than to be unconvincing about something that is true (Bywater, 1920).

### **Fantastic and Magic Realism: Postmodern modes of Narration**

In magical realism magical and realism co-exist. Here, several possible realities exist in the same time and space. Events that take place before the audience may appear real but at the same time they are magical as well. It manifests Roh's (1995) concept of magic realism where 'mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it' (p. 15). Though events of fantastic and magical realism appear similar, the events of former type can be distinguished from each other the latter by two respects. Fantastic literature which has its roots in 18<sup>th</sup> century gothic literature evolved naturally to 20<sup>th</sup> century magic realism (Khattab, 2022). Sandner (2011), in his work *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic*, studies the origin and end of the fantastic.

For the purpose of this study, there can be two distinctions mentioned between fantastic and magical realism. Firstly, in the genre of fantastic the characters oscillate between belief and non-belief. The hesitation persists in the minds of the characters which in turn shared by the audience. Tzvetan Torodov (1975) writes that 'this may be a hesitation that is shared with a character in the novel, or it may be emphasized in the text to produce a theme of ambiguity and hesitation' (p. 25). Secondly, events of fantastic creates a sense of nostalgia and melancholy among the characters and audiences as well. Amaryll Chanady (1985) differentiates between fantastic and magical realistic narrative as:

In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist. (p. 24)

According to Faris (2004) there are five primary characteristics of magical realism. First, the texts contain an irreducible element of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the efforts to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative mergers different realms; and finally magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space and ideas about time, space, and Identity (p. 7).

### **Girish Karnad: Plunging into Postmodern narration:**

Girish Karnad, though brought up and nurtured in the modern realistic tradition, employs fantastic and magical realistic narrative devices of postmodern tradition. Girish Karnad feels that

realistic narrative devices are derisory to depict the complexities, absurdities, and predicament of his protagonist Rani in *Nagamandala*. Therefore, he resorts to fantastic and magical realistic representation. He prefers to keep his character Rani in the world of magical realism. Rani doesn't prefer her life of fantasy to become real. Magical realism is a mode of literature that "combines realism with the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically with the ordinary, blurring distinction between them (Faris, 2004, p.1).

### **Nagamandala: Fantastic and Magical realism Superimposed**

Nagamandala (NM) (play with a cobra) is a play written by Girish Karnad. It became very popular because of the experimentation Karnad indulged in his narration. The plot is based on two tales from oral tradition of Karnataka. Nagamandala is also translated as 'Serpent ritual'. The play takes a flight from reality to fantastic and to magical realism. Rani is a young bride came to her husband's house leaving her loving and caring parents. Her husband Appanna locks her up at home and stays at nights with his concubine and visits her only for lunch. She is a victim of indifference and unfaithfulness of her husband. She longs for love and caring. There is a *naga*-cobra living in the anthill in front of her house. In an attempt to win her husband's love, she mixes 'love root' (a root believed to have powers to arouse love in a person) in the curry. Instead of her husband, the king cobra drinks the curry as she throws that curry on the anthill.

In the initial stages of the play, when Naga visits Rani in the nights in the disguise of Appanna (her husband), she was not certain whether it was a fantasy or reality. She mentions her apprehension with Naga.

All these days I was never sure I didn't just dream up these nightly visits of yours. You don't know how I have suffered. When I saw your scowling face in the mornings, I would be certain everything was a fantasy and almost want to cry....Suppose night queen bush does not blossom? Suppose it's all a dream (Nagamandala-NM 30-31).

But when she becomes pregnant all her fears and anxiety were dispelled. She says now she has definite evidence that she is not fantasizing. She confirms this to herself saying, 'If I had remained barren, I could have spent my whole life happily trying to work out whether all of this was real or a dream. But this is no dream now. Dreams remain in heads. This one has sent roots deep down into my womb' (NM 32).

In spite of the strong evidence, she had her own doubts about the whole thing whether it was real or fantasy because she could sense that though both of them appear alike (like Appanna) they had a fundamental difference. 'The Face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night' (NM 32). As a woman, she could make out the face of the day visitor and the touch of night visitor is not the same. Thus Rani allows the real and magic superimpose on each other and they co-exist with one another.

In the patriarchal male dominant society as a woman who is who is marginalized, Rani prefers to live in her own magical world. She wants to move upwards from her reality of torment and suffering into the world of fantasy and dreams and stay there. She knows that if her life of

fantasy becomes real, it can not escape the clutches and claws of patriarchal male dominant society. Similar to Rani Robert Kroetsch's characters also engage in fantasizing and dreaming and story telling. Delbaere (1992) comments on the 'tall tale' narrative form which is a popular oral cultural form among the Canadian west. Citing the example of Kroetsch's magical realist novel, Delbaere says that the town's men resort to story telling, 'to defeat the horizontality of their everyday life by drinking, playing, playing cards, telling stories and trying to escape upwards'(p. 93). Even Rani is caught up in similar predicament.

In the play, Rani is involved in four fantasy scenes. In the first instance, Rani talks to an imaginary Eagle. She asks 'Where are you taking me?' Eagle answers: 'Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you.'(NM 7) In this episode, the imaginary eagle is the internal self of Rani. It is a projection of her yearning to be with her parents knowing that going to her parents physically is not possible. She externalizes her internal self into an eagle so that it can take her to her parents. All the imagery used in this episode like 'beyond the seven seas and the seven isles', 'magic garden', 'the tree of emeralds' make it into a very effective fantasy.

The second Fantasy is a continuation of the first one, but with a difference of many days between the two. In this fantasy, Rani meets her parents. 'Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her. At night she sleeps between them. So she is not frightened any more. 'Don't worry,' they promise her. 'We won't let you go away again ever!' In the morning, the stag with the golden antlers comes to the door. He calls out to Rani, she refuses to go. 'I am not a stag,' he explains, 'I am a prince'....(NM 7). In this fantasy Rani's yearning further deepens and intensifies. After the longing for the comfort of the parents, she longs for a happy married life. Hence, a stag who claims to be a prince comes into her fantasy.

The third one, yet again, after a gap of a few days, is a continuation of the first two fantasies. Here, her fantasy gets concretized. Rani believes that something extraordinary should happen, then only she can get released from her prison life. '.....So the demon locks her up in his castle. Then it rains for seven days and seven nights. It pours. The sea floods the city. The waters break down the door of the castle. Then a big whale comes to Rani and says: 'come Rani,, 'let us go...' (NM 14-5).The words- 'big whale', 'come', 'let us', and 'go' indicate escape and deliverance. It comes out of a deep desire to escape from the troubled, unsympathetic, unkind, cruel and unconcerning world.

All the first three fantasy episodes are prologues to the final fantasy which totally blurs the distinction between the real and the magic. All the first three episodes are before the entry of Naga into Rani's life. The imagery of magic garden, stag, big whale forecast (as harbingers) the arrival of Naga in the final fantasy. The fantasy turns into a magical reality.

*(It gets dark on stage, Rani hurriedly lights the lamps; in the house. As she does so, some of the flames get into position.)*

RANI: *(to Flames)* Wait now. Don't be impatient. It won't be long.....It will Open out. Reach out with its fragrance.

*(Rushes into her bedroom. Waits tensely. Suddenly jumps up, breathes in deeply.)*

RANI: There it is...The smell of the blossoming night queen ! How it fills the house before he comes! How it welcomes him! God, how it takes me, sets each fibre in the on fire!’

*(Naga comes, they embrace. The Flames surround them and sing. Naga and Rani dance.) (NM 30)*

As she lights the lamps, the Flames light up and Rani tells the flames, the dream and how it has become real. Naga appears and they both dance, surrounded by singing flames. The way Rani announces the arrival of Naga gives an effect as if he is coming out of her fantasy.

When Kurudavva comes to check the result of her pieces of roots, Rani doubts that Appanna of the day and Appanna of the night are different. She doesn't want to question and probe it lest would disrupt her fantasy. She doesn't want to forego it. She is not certain whether it is a fantasy or reality. Even towards the end, before the trial scene, Naga conditions Rani to tell truth where as Rani is trying to mix up truth and belief.

NAGA: No. it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth.

RANI: What truth?

NAGA: The truth. Tell the truth while you are holding the cobra.

RANI: What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say my husband brought a dog and a mongoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?

NAGA: Say anything. But you must speak the truth.

RANI : And if I lie ?

NAGA : It will bite you.

RANI : God !

*(And then gently, almost menacingly.)*

And suppose what I think is the truth turns out to be false? (NM 34)

Rani is scared neither of cobra nor of death but of losing her fantasy. She wants to keep her fantasy alive forever. She doesn't want to stake her fantasy by this ordeal. 'I want this night to last forever Remain Unchanged.' (NM 35)

Another significant thing is, in all these fantasy episodes, Rani creates her own fantasy-Rani. Real-Rani and Fantasy-Rani superimpose on one another. Real Rani speaks about the wishes and yearnings of Fantasy-Rani.

RANI(Real-Rani) : So Rani (Fantasy-Rani) says: Do they ? Then please *(take me to them – immediately. Here I come. 'So the Eagle carries her (Fantasy- Rani) clear across the seven seas.....)* (NM 7)

Rushdie's (1982) narrator Saleem in *Midnight's Children* draws the life force from the fantasies and magical living he is involved with. He says, 'I was heading *abracadabra abracadabra* into the heart of a nostalgia which would keep me alive long enough to write these pages' (p. 450).

### Conclusion:

Most of the fantastic episodes of Rani in *Nagamandala* can be considered as instances of superimposition of fantastic and magical realism. Only in the initial stages when she resorts to speak to herself (to get off her boredom and loneliness) it can be seen as her own fantasizing. But as the plot deepens, the characters in her fantasy tend to appear as realistic ones. Hence, we may not be able to distinguish between the reality and the fantasy. Her fantasy gradually acquires a status of reality. In the latter stage of the play it is presented in a matter of fact manner giving it a magical realistic standing. Rushdie calls it 'a commingling of improbable and the mundane' (p. 9).

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