

The Therapeutic Role Embodied in Sri Lankan Nari Kolam Characters: A Cultural Psychological Perspective

R.A.N.N.I De Alwis¹



Abstract

Kolam drama is a traditional folk performance in Sri Lanka, widely practiced in the Western and Southern coastal regions. It integrates dance, music, mask-making, and storytelling to depict social, cultural, and psychological themes. Among its many forms, Nari Kolam holds a unique place due to its focus on female-centered characters that embody complex emotional and social narratives. This study examines the therapeutic role of selected female Nari Kolam characters, Giri Devi, Surabha Valliya, Panchanari Ghataya, Naga Kanya, and Narilatha through a cultural psychological perspective. The primary objective of this research is to explore how the portrayal of these characters facilitates emotional expression and contributes to the psychological well-being of the audience. A qualitative research methodology was employed, combining literary analysis with field-based data collection methods such as participant observation, residual study, and semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted within the Olaboduwa traditional Kolam lineage, involving a sample of ten dancers, ten drummers, and twenty audience members. Findings indicate that Nari Kolam performances create a symbolic and emotionally engaging space that allows individuals to express suppressed emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy. This aligns with the concept of catharsis, which emphasizes emotional release as a pathway to psychological relief. Furthermore, each character represents distinct aspects of feminine identity, social relationships, and moral tensions. The study concludes that Nari Kolam functions as a culturally embedded therapeutic mechanism that promotes emotional healing, social reflection, and collective integration. It highlights the importance of preserving traditional performance arts as valuable resources for cultural and psychological well-being in contemporary society.

Keywords

Catharsis, Cultural Psychology, Drama, Folk Performance, Nari Kolam

¹Department of Low Country Dance, Faculty of Dance and Drama, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5925-9604> Email: nilakshi.a@vapa.ac.lk



Introduction

Kolam is a traditional folk drama form in Sri Lanka that originated in the Southern Province and extended along the coastal belt of the Western Province. Before the emergence of modern entertainment media such as cinema, television, and radio, Kolam functioned as a primary medium through which rural Sinhala communities expressed their lived experiences, beliefs, and social realities. Through the Kolam Maduwa performance space, villagers presented narratives shaped by everyday life, often incorporating satire to criticize social behavior, moral weaknesses, and cultural norms. Kolam performances were deeply connected to ritual practices and community life. Farmers traditionally organized Kolam Madu celebrations after harvesting paddy as a way of relieving physical fatigue, sharing joy, and ensuring prosperity for the coming year. Similarly, fishing communities performed Kolam, sometimes in conjunction with Gara Maduwa, to ward off misfortune and restore balance believed to be disturbed by excessive fish harvests. These performances were therefore not only artistic expressions but also ritualistic and psychological processes that contributed to communal well-being.

Among the many forms of Kolam, Nari Kolam holds a unique place due to its emphasis on female characters and narratives. Characters such as Giri Devi, Suramba Valliya, Narilatha, Pancha Nari Ghataya, and Naga Kanya are central to these performances and embody complex emotional, social, and symbolic meanings. Giri Devi represents emotional suffering and spiritual transformation; Suramba Valliya reflects playfulness and communal joy; Narilatha symbolizes beauty, desire, and moral tension; Pancha Nari Ghataya represent diverse aspects of womanhood, including desire, conflict, morality, transformation, and relational dynamics; and Naga Kanya express duality between attraction and danger.

These characters are performed through stylized movements, expressive gestures, and intricately designed masks, allowing audiences to engage deeply with their symbolic meanings. From a cultural psychological perspective, Nari Kolam can be understood as a symbolic system that facilitates emotional expression and social reflection. Cultural psychology emphasizes that emotions and identities are shaped by cultural contexts, and traditional performances like Kolam provide a shared space where individuals can process their experiences collectively. The dramatic and often exaggerated portrayal of characters enables audiences to project their own emotions and conflicts onto the performance. A key concept relevant to this study is catharsis, the release of suppressed emotions through artistic expression. Nari Kolam performances create a safe and culturally accepted environment for expressing emotions such

as joy, anger, sadness, and desire. Through humor, satire, and symbolic storytelling, audiences experience emotional relief and psychological balance.

Despite its cultural and psychological significance, the Kolam tradition is currently facing decline due to modernization and changing entertainment preferences. Many traditional characters and performance techniques are disappearing, and some modern adaptations distort the original poetic and performative elements. Therefore, this study aims to examine how Nari Kolam characters function as a form of cultural therapy, promoting emotional release and collective well-being.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the therapeutic and symbolic dimensions of Nari Kolam performances. A qualitative approach is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' emotional experiences, interpretations, and cultural meanings associated with the performances. The research is interpretive in nature, focusing on how individuals perceive and internalize the symbolic content of Nari Kolam.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple methods were employed to ensure comprehensive data collection:

- **Literature Review:**
Analysis of Kolam texts, folklore, and existing scholarly works to understand the historical and symbolic background of Nari Kolam characters.
- **Participant Observation:**
Direct observation of Kolam performances, focusing on performer behavior, audience reactions, and the overall atmosphere of the Kolam Maduwa.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:**
Interviews were conducted with dancers, drummers, and audience members. Open-ended questions were used to explore emotional responses and personal interpretations.

- Residual Study:
Examination of masks, costumes, and ritual artifacts to understand their symbolic meanings and aesthetic significance.

Sample Selection

The study sample consisted of: Ten Kolam dancers, ten drummers, twenties members of the audience. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experience with Nari Kolam performances. Audience members were interviewed after viewing performances to capture immediate emotional responses.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The process included: familiarization with data, coding key themes, identifying patterns related to emotional expression and symbolism, and interpreting findings through a cultural psychological framework.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant therapeutic role of Nari Kolam performances in facilitating emotional expression and promoting collective well-being. The integration of symbolic characters, music, dance, and communal participation creates a powerful environment for psychological engagement.

Emotional Expression and Therapeutic Role

Audience responses revealed that Nari Kolam performances provide a space for expressing suppressed emotions such as anger, sadness, joy, and desire. The exaggerated gestures and dramatic narratives allow viewers to relate their personal experiences to the characters. For instance, the tragic background of Giri Devi evokes feelings of sorrow and empathy, while the playful performance of Suramba Valliya generates joy and laughter. Similarly, Nari Latha's seductive and morally complex character stimulates curiosity and reflection, while Naga Kanya's dual nature creates a sense of fascination and tension.

The History of Kolam

The traditional story of the birth of the Kolam is narrated in the Prasthavanava of the Kelawe version. All the texts say that the occasion for the first performance arose because of a deep

sorrow that arose in the queen of the great king, Maha Sammattha, at the sight of the Kolam. To appease the deep sorrow, actors from various lands came to perform before the queen, but the queen was not pleased, and the king then ordered that the faces of the people be cut off and a Kolam dance performed. The queen was very impressed when she saw the Kolam dance. There is a slight difference between the story in the Kelawe version and the story in the remaining Kolam books on this point. According to the Kolam books, the masks were made by the divine son of Vishwakarma, on the orders of the god Shakra. He made faces and placed them in the king's garden along with a book explaining how to perform the Kolam. The gardener saw them and reported them to the king. The king then ordered a Kolam performance to be held following the instructions given in the book.

The human characters in the Kelawe version are a warrior, a warrior's wife, a drummer, a man with five wives, an old man and a woman, a pregnant woman, and a foreign beggar. The inhuman characters include a naga maiden, a guru, a giant, a Purnaka demon, a Ratnakuta demon, a Nila Giri demon, and the Giri Goodes, a Naga Rakshaya (an apparition of cobra-capelloes), a Maraka demon (a killer), an Asura demon, the Dala Rakshaya, and the Gara demon. The animal roles include a bull, a tiger, a lion, a wolf, and a bird. (Sarathchandra, 2013)

Giri Devi – Emotional Expression & Therapeutic Role

Giri Devi evokes deep feelings of sorrow, empathy, and compassion due to her tragic narrative, allowing the audience to connect with experiences of grief and emotional suffering. This emotional engagement facilitates catharsis, enabling viewers to release suppressed sadness and achieve emotional relief and inner healing. Giri Devi appears in two instances in the lowland dance tradition. One is the Giri Devi Kolam of the Kolam dance tradition, and the other is the performance of Giri Devi in the Maha Gara Yakun Yaga or Gara Maduwa. It is a tradition to perform the Giri Devi Kolam among the Kolam dances such as Sarana Valli, Narilatha, Panchanariyata, and Naga Kanya, which are considered to be female dances belonging to the Kolam Performance. The artisans take care to polish Giri Devi's mask with golden color, which is found among the traditional Kolam Kuttas, as it is a traditional custom to paint the mask, as mentioned in the relevant verses.

It is said in poetic texts associated with the ritual practice that just as the Gara family has twelve Gara demons, there are also twelve Giri demons. Giri Devi Goodes is the sister of Gara Yaka or Dala Prince. Giri Princess, who was defiled by her brother Dala Prince, could not bear the shame and sorrow and committed suicide by hanging herself from a tree. Dala Prince, who was devastated by the loss of his sister, also died and was reborn as a Gara demon, and after death,

Giri Princess became Giri Devi. In some places, it is mentioned that Giri was the consort of Yakini. (Jayasena, K. (1999).¹⁰⁵ The Gara Yaka is a greedy creature. When the fish catch is over, the fishermen practice the Gara Madu dance on the beach from time to time because they believe that the Gara Yaka devours the fish. For this reason, and in general, the Gara Madu dance is performed for fertility.

The dancers are accustomed to performing the dance styles of Giri Devi. Despite its traditional existence, it is no secret that a certain kind of innovation is being seen in schools and other educational systems today. It has not been more than two decades since the beginning of that dance. The Giri Devi dance, which began as a fascinating creative dance element, has spread widely in the educational systems and is now being accepted as a traditional aspect by most of society (Kottegoda, 1999).

Narilatha – Emotional Expression and Therapeutic Role

Narilatha stimulates curiosity, desire, and moral reflection, as her seductive nature evokes inner conflicts related to attraction and ethical boundaries. This reflective process allows the audience to confront and process their own desires and moral dilemmas, contributing to emotional awareness and self-understanding. There are various theories about femininity among the Sinhalese. According to one of them, it is compared to a very beautiful flower found in the Himalayan forests. The special feature of this flower is that it is shaped like a woman's upper body. It is said that this flower has the power to weaken the spiritual resolve of the ascetics who protect the soil in the Himalayan forests.

Traditional paintings that are found in temples and shrines also have a special focus on femininity. They depict a pattern in which the lower body is depicted as a flower among the patterns of a leaf, and the upper body is a female figure. The upper body of the female figure is naked, and the head is uncovered. (Kottagoda, 1999) In some representations, she holds a flower in her mouth, while in others she is shown holding two branches. The female vine, associated with a mythical arboreal motif, appears to function as a highly elaborate symbolic image. It is suggested that female masks may have been developed based on these traditional pictorial conventions.

The reasons behind this can be that the painters who were involved in the painting industry associated with temples and shrines were also involved in Bali Thovil rituals. This design is reflected in the head ornamentation of the female mask. Accordingly, the female mask is regarded as one of the most refined expressions within the Kolam tradition. Some scholars

further suggest that it draws upon elements of divine or mythological narratives. The feminine elegance embodied in Narilatha Kolam is conveyed through graceful movements that are not observed in other Kolam dance forms. The exquisite Narilatha mask belonging to the Udupala Kala Sangamaya of Mirissa is said to be more than two hundred (200) years old. (Kottagoda,1999)

Naga Kanya – Emotional Expression & Therapeutic Role

Naga Kanya creates feelings of fascination, awe, and tension by embodying the duality of beauty and danger, evoking both attraction and fear. This dual emotional experience helps audiences explore complex psychological states, encouraging balance and a deeper understanding of conflicting emotions.

Among these female dances, the artists are accustomed to giving special importance to the Naga Kanya dance. Most of the artists in a Kolam group have slender body, who are trained for the Naga Kanya dance. This was expected because a slender body is required for the Naga Kanya dance in the truest sense of the word. A flexible body is required to convey the movements and expressive forms contained in that dance because the performance demands that the dancer fully embody the character's physical and expressive range.

Naga Kanya is the wife of the Naga demon. She comes to the underworld after receiving a boon from the Naga king. Naga Kanya, whose face resembles the full moon, is adorned with white hair. Her head is a snake. It is said in the poems that she looks like a goddess. After singing several blessing verses introducing the character, the female performer enters the dance arena. (Kottagoda,1996)

Pancha Nari Ghataya – Emotional Expression & Therapeutic Role

Pancha Nari Ghataya reflects emotions such as jealousy, rivalry, affection, insecurity, and solidarity, representing the complex dynamics of relationships among women. These interactions create a mixture of tension and emotional bonding that mirrors real-life social experiences.

This character enables audiences to recognize and reflect on their own interpersonal conflicts and relationships. By symbolically presenting both conflict and unity, it supports emotional awareness, emotional release, and social understanding, contributing to psychological balance and collective healing. These emotional responses align with the concept of catharsis, where individuals experience psychological relief through emotional release. The performance acts

as a symbolic outlet, enabling audiences to process their internal conflicts in a socially accepted manner.

Symbolism of Female Characters

Each Nari Kolam character represents specific psychological and social themes:

- Giri Devi symbolizes suffering, purity, and transformation
- Suramba Valliya represents joy, playfulness, and social interaction
- Narilatha embodies beauty, desire, and moral ambiguity
- Naga Kanya reflects the duality between attraction and danger
- Pancha Nari Ghataya reflects social relationships among women, including conflict, unity, and competition

These symbolic representations allow audiences to engage with complex human experiences indirectly. The use of masks and stylized movements enhances this symbolic communication, making the performance both visually and emotionally impactful. The female characters in Nari Kolam embody deep symbolic meanings related to emotional expression, social roles, morality, and psychological states. These characters are not merely aesthetic figures but function as cultural symbols through which audiences interpret and reflect upon human experiences. Each character represents a distinct aspect of femininity and contributes to the therapeutic impact of the performance.

Giri Devi – Symbol of Suffering and Spiritual Transformation

Giri Devi is one of the most significant female figures in the Kolam tradition, closely associated with ritual practices such as Gara Maduwa. Her origin story, which involves tragedy, shame, and transformation into a divine being, symbolizes the emotional journey from suffering to spiritual elevation. She represents themes of grief, purity, and resilience. The golden-painted mask of Giri Devi reflects divine beauty and inner strength, emphasizing her transformation from a human figure into a sacred entity. For the audience, Giri Devi evokes empathy and sorrow, allowing them to connect with personal experiences of loss and emotional pain. Through this connection, viewers experience a form of emotional release, making Giri Devi a powerful symbol of psychological healing and catharsis.



Figure 1: Giri Devi Mask

(Photographed by the author, taken at the residence of a member of the Olaboduwa Parampara, personal communication, January 01, 2026)

Suramba Valliya – Symbol of Joy and Playfulness

Suramba Valliya represents the lighter and more playful dimension of human life. This character is associated with traditional games such as Athmanam Keliya, where performers engage in rhythmic ball-throwing movements. The mask design, often depicting a female figure's spheres, symbolizes activity, movement, and entertainment. The dance itself is lively and rhythmic, creating a joyful atmosphere that encourages laughter and relaxation among the audience. Symbolically, Suramba Valliya represents social interaction, communal happiness, and emotional relief. Her performance allows the audience to momentarily escape from stress and experience joy, contributing to the therapeutic function of Nari Kolam.



Figure 2: Suramba Valliya Mask

(Photographed by the author, taken at the residence of a member of the Olaboduwa Parampara, personal communication, January 01, 2026)

Narilatha – Symbol of Beauty, Desire, and Moral Ambiguity

Narilatha is one of the most aesthetically refined and symbolically complex characters in Nari Kolam. Inspired by mythical imagery of a female-form flower, this character represents beauty, sensuality, and temptation. Her visual representation, combining floral elements with the female form, reflects the fusion of nature and femininity. Narilatha is often associated with the idea of seductive power, believed to distract ascetics from their spiritual practices. This character symbolizes the tension between desire and morality, highlighting the psychological conflict between attraction and discipline. For the audience, Narilatha evokes curiosity and introspection, encouraging reflection on human desires and ethical boundaries. Thus, Narilatha functions as a symbolic representation of inner conflict and emotional complexity.



Figure 3: Narilatha Masks

(Photographed by the author, taken at the residence of a member of the Olaboduwa Parampara, personal communication, January 01, 2026)

Naga Kanya – Symbol of Duality

Naga Kanya is a highly significant female character who embodies the dual nature of existence beauty and danger, attraction and fear. As a figure associated with the serpent (Naga) world, she represents supernatural power and mystery. Her appearance, characterized by a radiant face, white costume, and serpent imagery, enhances her divine and otherworldly presence. The dance movements of Naga Kanya require grace and control, reflecting her elegance and hidden power. Symbolically, Naga Kanya represents the complexity of human emotions and

relationships, where beauty can coexist with risk and uncertainty. She evokes both admiration and caution in the audience, creating a deep psychological impact. This duality makes Naga Kanya a powerful symbol of emotional tension and balance within the human psyche.



Figure 4: Naga Kanya Mask

(Photographed by the author, taken at the residence of a member of the Olaboduwa Parampara, personal communication, January 01, 2026)

Pancha Nari Ghataya

According to Rev. John Callaway's English ethnographic description of the traditional "Panchanari Kolam," the scene presents a highly stylized ritual performance in which five women appear together in an idealized and symbolic formation. They are described as carrying a vessel on their heads, their bodies gleaming like gold and their faces resembling the full moon, creating an image of extraordinary beauty and attraction. Their ornaments, movements, and collective presence are elaborately portrayed as captivating the audience, arousing admiration, desire, and emotional disturbance among spectators. Callaway further notes that the Panchanari figure is richly decorated, with the women's limbs arranged in an interwoven, patterned manner, emphasizing the choreographic and symbolic nature of the performance rather than realistic representation. The dancers are said to receive offerings from onlookers, while their appearance likened to golden images and radiant beings evokes intense fascination and moral vulnerability in those who witness the scene. Overall, Callaway's account frames the Panchanari Kolam as a ritualized dramatic spectacle combining dance, ornamentation, and

symbolic imagery that strongly affects the emotional and sensory response of the audience (Ediriweera, 2013).

Symbol of Unity

Panchanari Ghataya is a traditional Sri Lankan artistic symbol in which five female figures are intertwined to form the shape of a sacred vessel or pot. It is more than a decorative motif—it carries layered meanings related to femininity, unity, prosperity, and spiritual completeness.

1. Individuality Becoming Wholeness - Each woman appears as a separate figure, yet together they create one complete form. This symbolizes how individual identities can unite to become something greater and whole. It reflects the idea that strength and completeness often emerge through connection rather than isolation.
2. Beauty Becoming Abundance - The feminine form has long been associated with beauty, grace, and elegance. When these forms merge into a universal symbol of fullness, fertility, and wealth, it suggests that beauty transforms into abundance and prosperity. Grace becomes nourishment. Attraction becomes a blessing.
3. Feminine Energy as Creation - Across many cultures, feminine energy represents life-giving power, nurturing, intuition, and creation. In Panchanari Ghataya, five women together symbolize that feminine power is not passive beauty, but an active creative force capable of generating life, harmony, and renewal.
4. Harmony in Diversity - Although made of multiple figures, the composition remains balanced and symmetrical. This represents unity within diversity, different forms, personalities, and energies coexisting in harmony. Difference does not weaken the whole; it enriches it.
5. Sacred and Spiritual Fullness - The vessel itself is often associated with sacred offerings, purity, water, fertility, and blessings. Therefore, the symbol also reflects spiritual fulfillment, sacred abundance, and inner completeness.



Figure 5: Panchanari Mask

(Photographed by the author, taken at the residence of a member of the Olaboduwa Parampara, personal communication, January 01, 2026)

Collective Healing and Cultural Integration

Nari Kolam performances function as a form of collective therapy. Unlike individual psychological treatment, they create a shared emotional experience among community members. Observations indicated that audiences responded collectively through laughter, emotional engagement, and participation. This shared experience fosters social cohesion and reinforces cultural identity. Ritual elements within the performance also contribute to spiritual integration, enhancing the sense of communal harmony. Furthermore, the Kolam Maduwa (performance arena) acts as a cultural space where social tensions and conflicts can be expressed and resolved symbolically. By reflecting everyday struggles through performance, Nari Kolam helps maintain emotional balance within the community.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Nari Kolam is not merely a traditional performance art but a culturally embedded therapeutic practice. Through its symbolic characters, expressive performances, and communal setting, it facilitates emotional release, social reflection, and

psychological healing. The findings confirm that Nari Kolam enables catharsis by providing a structured and culturally meaningful space for expressing complex emotions. Female characters such as Giri Devi, Suramba Valliya, Narilatha, Pancha Nari Ghataya, and Naga Kanya play a crucial role in this process by representing diverse aspects of human experience, including suffering, desire, joy, and conflict. Additionally, the collective nature of Kolam performance enhances its therapeutic impact by fostering social cohesion and cultural continuity. The shared emotional experience strengthens community bonds and contributes to a sense of belonging and well-being. However, the decline of the Kolam tradition due to modernization poses a significant challenge. The loss of traditional knowledge, distortion of performance elements, and reduced community participation threaten its continuity. Therefore, it is essential to preserve and promote Kolam as both a cultural heritage and a valuable psychological resource.

In conclusion, Nari Kolam can be understood as a form of cultural therapy that integrates art, ritual, and psychology. It highlights the importance of traditional performance arts in addressing emotional and social needs, offering valuable insights for both cultural preservation and modern therapeutic practices.

References

- Ariyaratne, C. (2000). Traditional folk theatre of Sri Lanka. National Library of Sri Lanka.
- Bandura, A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Prentice-Hall.
- Bruner, J. (1990). Acts of meaning. Harvard University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. Harper & Row.
- De Silva, P. (1995). Ritual and theatre in Sri Lankan folk tradition. University of Peradeniya Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1995). The elementary forms of religious life (*K. E. Fields, Trans.*). Free Press. (Original work published 1912)
- Geertz, C. (1973). The interpretation of cultures. Basic Books.
- Gombrich, R. (1971). Precept and practice: Traditional Buddhism in the rural highlands of Ceylon. Oxford University Press.

- Jung, C. G. (1964). *Man and his symbols*. Doubleday.
- Kottagoda, J. (1999). *Prayogika pahatharata narthanaya*. J.K. Publication. Sri Lanka.
- Kasturiratne, W. (2010). Kolam drama and ritual performance in southern Sri Lanka. *Journal of Sri Lankan Cultural Studies*
- Malinowski, B. (1948). *Magic, science, religion, and other essays*. Free Press.
- Murdock, G. P. (1945). The common denominator of cultures. *In The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (pp. 123–142). Columbia University Press.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1984). *The cult of the goddess Pattini*. University of Chicago Press.
- Peacock, J. L. (1968). *Rites of modernization: Symbolic and social aspects of Indonesian ritual*. University of Chicago Press.
- Schechner, R. (1985). *Between theater and anthropology*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Publishing.
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. PAJ Publications.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Intangible cultural heritage and traditional performing arts*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Wickramasinghe, K. (2015). *Sri Lankan folk performing arts and cultural identity*. Colombo University Journal of Humanities.