

GIRISHKARNAD'S NAGA-MANDALA : A MYTH OF CHASTITY

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“GirishKarnad makes this folk-tale (Naga-Mandala) stand on its head letting it unfold dramatically... This is a play, powerful, gripping and exciting... It uses tradition creatively and sensitively... It is fast-paced, well-plotted, coherent, and controlled. The central conflict is sharply defined and brilliantly executed.”

-Makarand Paranjape, Indian Express Magazine

Abstract

Indian drama encompasses the entire gamut of Indian culture—the myths, the folklores, the history and the ethos of India. Drama today has emerged as a powerful resurgent medium to project the issues related to gender, class, caste and communities. GirishKarnad has enriched the Indian drama by virtue of his dramatic genius. His originality as a dramatist lies in his extraordinary skill of using myths, history and folktales to make the drama lively, thought-provoking and gripping. Karnad bases his play **Naga-Mandala**, on two folktales from Karnataka. Karnad has evocatively conveyed the application of traditional to the contemporary times like an astute technical craftsman. The playwright has sought to unfold the mysteries of a woman's heart and the double ending of the play has been admitted with tongue in cheek. Karnad has depicted a mythological legend in a very interesting and humorous style. He uses old conventions and motifs of folktales and folk theatre; masks, curtains, dolls, the story within a story to create a bizarre world. Ideas from Indian legends and myths have become a vehicle of a new vision. **Naga-Mandala** is full of mythical wonder and is enshrouded in a realm of magic and supernaturalism. The play examines the issues of adultery and chastity and questions the patriarchal moral code which believes in the loyalty of a woman to her husband but not in the fidelity of a man to his wife.

Keywords: Myth, Chastity, Adultery, Folktales, Supernaturalism.

Myths, being a traditional study of unknown origin handed down from the earliest times. It has a close resemblance to legends. All though the words are frequently used interchangeably,

a myth properly deals with gods and legends with men. Myths and legends are types of folk-lore. There are four types of myths- cultural, ritualistic, nature and creation, besides these there are philosophic, social, political and psychological. In majority of his plays Karnad uses the narrative myth, history and folk-lore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary contexts. Indian English drama has dealt with philosophical views, religious conviction, political issues, and social problems, psychological complexities through myths, legends, historical events and day-to-day happenings. The dominant presence of the ancient and medieval past in Karnad's drama is a result of both personal and cultural compulsion. The plays based on myth and folk-lore evoke a chronologically indeterminate realm of kings and queens, gods and goddesses, concubines, horses, elephants, bullock carts and supernatural beings. Naga-Mandala is based on two oral folk-tales Karnad heard from A. Ramanujan. 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. Girish Karnad in this play of 1988 takes a departure from the classical sources and concentrates on the local Kannada folk-tales to produce an entirely new kind of drama. For theatrical effectiveness, the playwright has employed some techniques from the folk-theatre. Naga-Mandala (play with cobra) was translated into English. Karnad won the Karnataka Sahitya Academy award for the most creative work of 1989 for this play. He comments about the enormous energy of the folk tradition:

The energy of 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 head. The various conventions the chorus, the music, the smilingly non-human worlds- permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative analysis of the central problem. They allow for borrowing a phrase from Bertolt Brecht- complex scene.¹

The patriarchal society that invented chastity as a value to be rigorously observed, eulogizing the women who have cherished much enslaving imposition through myth, literature and folk-lore giving models like Sita who had to undergo the fire-ordeal to prove her chastity to Rama, eventually succeeded in providing us with excellent sculptures that served as a moral guide to our ethnicity for years. Naga-Mandala inspired by the popular myth of Naga, closely parallels the story of Ahalya that occurs in The Ramayana. What makes Ahalya's story engaging to us presently is that hers is not a tale of compliance with the demanding entreaties of patriarchal cultural mores, but rather a lucid tale of female subversion. Naga-Mandala can be read as a parallel story of subversion of patriarchal values of a woman. The plot of the play has been ingeniously designed. It has a prologue and two acts of which are all knit together. The prologue sets the tone of the play and provides a beginning. The play opens in the inner sanctum of a ruined temple, where when the idol is so broken that it can be hardly identified. A man, a playwright is sitting, who is trying his best to keep himself awake for he has been told by a mendicant:

MAN: I may be dead within the next few hours.(long pause.)

I am not talking of 'acting' dead. Actually dead.I might die right in front of your eyes.(Pause.)

A mendicant told me: 'you must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you'll live. If not, you will die on the last night of the month.' I laughed out

loud when I heard him. I thought nothing would be easier than spending a night awake.(Pause.)

I was wrong. Perhaps death makes one sleepy. Every night this month I have been dozing off before even being aware of it. I am convinced I am seeing something with these eyes of mine, only to wake up and find I was dreaming. Tonight is my last chance.(Pause.)

For tonight is the last night of the month. Even of my life, perhaps? For how do I know sleep won't creep in on me again as it has every night so far? I may doze off right in front of you. And that will be an end of me.(Pause.)

I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fate. And he said: 'You have written plays. You have staged them. You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that abused mass of sleep has turned against you and become the Curse of Death.'(Pause.)

I hadn't realized my plays had had that much impact.(Pause.)

Tonight may be my last night. So I have fled from home and come to this temple, nameless and empty. For years I've been lording it over my family as a writer. I couldn't bring myself to die a writer's death in front of them.(Pause.)

I swear by this absent God, if I survive this night I shall have nothing more to do with themes, plots or stories. I abjure all story-telling, all play-acting. (pp. 247-248)

Naga-Mandala, a play within the play, begins with the prologue. The characters of the prologue are the narrator- characters of the play proper, and their story constitutes the sub-plot of the play. The setting of the prologue is in the inner sanctum of a ruined temple. A man is sitting in the temple. He is sad because a mendicant has told him that he must keep awake at least one whole night that month. If he could do it he would live. If not the man would die on the last night of that month. The man had been dozing off every night, and that was the last night of the month. The play opens with a conventional device of explaining the reasons why the failed writer must keep awake the whole night. The writer is cursed for making his spectators fall asleep while watching his plays. The abused mass of sleep has turned against him. The man never realised that his plays could bore people so much as to make them to fall asleep while watching them. As he had put so many to sleep with his plays, he must be deprived of it. He must keep awake at least one night in a month if he wants to live. Otherwise his sleep would be his death. The play opens with a conventional device of explaining the reasons why the failed writer must keep awake the whole night. The Flames from the village homes assemble in the temple and share stories. One such story of Rani is whose husband is enamoured by another woman. And he is reluctant to spend time with her, much less consummate their marriage. As the story in the opening of the Act 1 narrates:

STORY: A young girl. Her name... it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of her whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses. For when her hair was tied up in a knot, it was as though a black King Cobra lay curled on the nape of her neck, coil upon glistening coil. When it hung loose, the tresses flowed, a torrent of black, along her young limbs, and got entangled in her silver anklets. Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead. Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon, her husband came and took her with him to village. His name was-well, any common name will do- (p. 253)

Rani is married to an adulterous youth who is rich and his parents are both dead. His name is Appanna (which means any man.) he takes her to his village. he keeps her locked up in the house while he spends all his time with his concubine. Kurudavva, a blind old lady in the village whom her son Kappanna carries on his back everywhere, learns that Appanna has got married and brought home his bride. She comes to visit Rani despite Kappanna's protests. It is seen in their conversation:

KAPPANNA: Mother, you can't do this! You can't start meddling in other people's affairs the first thing in the morning. That Appanna should have been born a wild beast or a reptile. By some mistake, he got human birth. He can't stand other people. Why do you want to tangle with him?

KURUDAVVA: Whatever he is, he is the son of my best friend. His mother and I were like sisters. Poor thing, she died bringing him into this world. Now a new daughter-in-law comes to her house. How can I go on as though nothing has happened? Besides, I haven't slept a wink since you told me you saw Appanna in his concubine's courtyard. He has got himself a bride-and he still goes after that harlot? (p.255)

It is an obvious concern for Rani that prompts Kurudavva to tangle with Appanna and meddle in his affairs. The story functions at four levels with a story within the preceding story. At the outermost casing is an author whose plays are so tedious that the spectators eventually doze off. For this offence the author is ordained to die unless he manages to remain awake for one night before the month ends. The night of the particular performance is his last chance. Amusingly, the writer can avoid death by remaining awake. The second level has a group of personified flames gathering to gossip after their day's work in the very temple where the author deplores his predicament and the introduction of the story by one of the flames. The need for the story to escape the woman exemplifies the nature of oral tradition. There is also the play's characteristic contradiction in the story's existence as autonomous and independent of the person who tells it, while it can live on only by being told and shared. The third level introduces the personified story and provides a platform for the interaction of the characters introduced in the preceding echelons, between the Man, the Flames and the Story. The identification of the Flames with women, and the personification of the story, the primary narrative voice in the play, with a young vocal woman, concocts a persuasive device for creating a particular female context that is conspicuously set within the very framework of the man-oriented authorial experience. The fourth narrative level gives us Rani's story, the story of repressive power structures that keep women subservient and marginalized, which requires questioning today. Rani's attitude towards her husband after her marriage is that of a traditional wife in a patriarchal society where every husband is worshipped as a god. She cannot talk to her husband freely during day time. She is at his beck and call and reserves no right to question him and his ways. He can treat her as he likes, and enjoy himself with any woman. Before her marriage the girl in the patriarchal society grows up under the eyes of her brothers and father, later she comes under the vigil of a stranger whom she is married to. She has no choice in the selection of her husband. Thereafter, she has to serve him as a slave throughout her life. So woman in the patriarchal society is not treated as a human being but as a lifeless thing, a commodity. In the name of chastity, woman sacrifices herself as M. Sarat Babu observes:

“Chastity is a value invented by the patriarchal culture and accepted by woman. It is one of the most powerful yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved woman for ages since the dawn of patriarchy... The Ramayana in which Sita undergoes the fire

ordeal to prove her chastity has been a cultural guide to Indians for more than two thousand years.²

Every Indian playwright is thought that chastity is more important than life and its loss and the resultant stigma is worse than death. It is because of this forced morality that the women undergo all sorts of oppression. Those who raise a voice against it have to face the ire of society. Rani's plight in Naga-Mandala is no way better. It is said in the book of quotations:

The woman was not taken from Adam's head, we know,
To show she must not rule him-it is evidently so,
The woman was taken from under Adam's arm
So she must be protected from injuries and harm.³

Rani is a pure embodiment of feminine simplicity, innocence and powerlessness. Marriage for Rani means the loss of the secure world of childhood and parental love, and she has to re-imagine that world in her fantasies merely to keep herself from psychological collapse. Appanna brings his wife and claps her under lock and key with the injunction that she will come only once in the afternoon and he must find his lunch ready. He passes his days and nights with a concubine and Rani leads her life as a deserted wife. Her dream of a happy married life is shattered. Rani, a passive victim feels lonely and claustrophobic within the four walls of the eternal hell. She says:

RANI: I am so frightened at night, I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between Father and Mother. But here, alone- Kurudavva, can you help me, please? Will you please send word to my parents that I am, like this, here? Will you ask them to free me and take me home? I would jump into a well-if only I could- (p.259).

The ill-tempered, tyrannical, two-dimensional husband, Appanna, reduces his wife's daily life to a futureless existence without companionship or community except for the clandestine visit by Kurudavva, the old blind village woman, a close friend of Appanna's mother Kurudavva, on her first visit to see her close friend's daughter-in-law appalled to find that Appanna keeps his wife locked up like a caged bird. Kurudavva touches her and is amazed at her beauty. Kurudavva exclaims in joy:

KURUDAVVA: Dear girl, it's no use crying. Don't cry! Don't! Come here. Come, come to the window. Let me touch you. My eyes are all in my fingers.

(She feels Rani's face, shoulder, neck through the bars of the window.)

Ayyo! How beautiful you are. Ears like hibiscus. Skin like young mango leaves. Lips like rolls of silk. How can that Appanna gallivant around leaving such loneliness wasting away at home? (p. 259).

She is touched to learn that Rani is so innocent that she does not know the real meaning of what being a wife is and that she hasn't had any physical relationship with her husband since their marriage. Rani tells her that she is scared sleeping alone at night and asks Kurudavva to send a message to her parents about her plight. Kurudavva assures her that she would take care of everything. She then calls out to her son, who is sitting behind a tree, and asks him to run home. He should go into the cattle-shed and look for an old tin trunk in the left corner, where he keeps his plough, behind the pillar and on the shelf. He would find a bundle of cloth amidst the odds and ends there. Inside the bundle is a wooden box. Kurudavva then tells Rani about her son Kappanna. He is not really as dark as his name might suggest. He was a fair child when he was born but since Kurudavva was blind and she was not familiar with anything but darkness. So she decided to call him Kappanna, the Dark one. She now tells why she had sent Kappanna home:

KURUDAVVA: I tell you. I was born blind. No one would marry me. My father wore himself out trudging from village to village looking for a husband. But to no avail. One day a mendicant came to our house. No one was home. I was alone. I looked after him in every way. Cooked hot food specially for him and served him to his heart's content. He was pleased with me and gave me three pieces of a root. 'Any man who eats one of these will marry you', he said.

RANI: And then?

KURUDAVVA: 'Feed him the smallest piece first', he said. 'If that gives no results, then try the middle-sized one. Only if both fail, feed him the largest piece.' (P. 261).

Rani is charmed. Kurudavva tells her that one day a distantly related boy came to their village and stayed with them, she served the middle-sized piece to him. The conversation between Rani and Kurudavva goes on like this:

KURUDAVVA: One day a boy distantly related to me came to our village and stayed with us. That day I ground one of the pieces into paste, mixed it in with the food, and served him. Can you guess which piece I chose?

RANI (working it out): Which one now? The smallest one, as the mendicant said? No, no, surely the biggest piece.

KURUDAVVA: No, I was in such a hurry I barely noticed the small one. The biggest scared me. So I used the middle-sized root.

RANI: And then?

KURUDAVVA: He finished his meal, gave me one look and fell in love. Married me within the next two days. Never went back to his village. It took the plague to detach him from me.

(Rani laughs.) (p. 261).

The play Naga-Mandala examines the shifting and growing of a newly married couple and their gradual understanding of the role, frustration and responsibilities of the marital bond. Karnad with the help of his ethnic theatre tradition delineates the multiple aspects and psychological self-divisions of the human beings. With the help of the age long myth of snake-lover the sexual aspect of the hero, Appanna, has been projected. The same man, who loves, caresses during the darkness of the night, is harsh and brutal during the light of the day. The wonderful use of the symbols, as snake, dark long tresses, night, day, blindness helps Karnad in his portrayal of the traumas and tribulation of a newly married couple. The longing of Rani for her parents, finds a superb metaphorical expression in the opening of the play:

RANI: Listen-please-

(She does not know what is happening, stands perplexed. She cannot even weep. She goes and sits in a corner of her room. Talks to herself indistinctly. Her words become distinct as the lights dim. It is night.)

.... So Rani asks him: 'Where are you taking me?' And the Eagle answer: '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.' So Rani says 'Do they?' Then please, please take me to them-immediately. Here I come.' So the Eagle carries her clear across the seven seas...

(She falls asleep, Moans 'Oh, Mother!' 'Father' in her sleep. It gets light. She wakes up with a fright, looks around, then runs to the bathroom, mimes splashing water on her face, goes into the kitchen, starts cooking. Appanna comes. Opens the lock on the front door and

comes in. Goes to the bathroom. Mimes bathing, then comes to the kitchen and sits down to eat. She serves him food.) (p. 254).

The spontaneous desires and impulses of Rani that are prohibited and subdued to the unconscious can only find their way back through her dreams. Her dreams powerfully and symbolically reveal her inner psyche. But the eagle which takes Rani to her parents symbolises flight and freedom, also a bird of prey. The prince designed as a stag with golden antlers that reveals her instinctive desire for Appanna, also alludes to the golden deer that has allured Sita tempting her to cross the line of social confinement. The stag can be considered as a prelude to Naga's entrance into Rani's life as her lover. Kurudavvas offer of help that alleviate some of the trauma of Rani's tormented psyche to take the shape of a whale that saves her from the clutches of the demon. Parallel to the dreams, that are only personal and private, are the myths. Appanna has a concubine outside. For her he leaves behind his own newly-wedded young wife waiting for him day and night. Appanna visits her only once in twenty-four hours and that too not for her sake but for his meals. Kappanna the son of Kurudavva has seen him in his concubine's courtyard. Appanna's words in the first act, when we meet him for the first time are marked by male-chauvinism. He commands his newly-wedded wife and treats her with contempt reserved for women in a patriarchal society. Left peeping out of the barred window, she can neither talk to anybody nor can she go anywhere. She is only to look for her husband and serve him as a servant. This is her plight as a wife in a patriarchal society. In her isolation Rani begins to build a world of stories around her. She imagines herself to be a princess locked up by a demon in his castle. Kurudavva comes to her rescue by giving her a love potion to win over her errant husband. Rani grinds the smaller root into a paste and mixed it in Appanna's milk. He drinks it and faints. Rani is terrified:

(Opens the door and goes in. To Rani.)

I am lurching out today. I'll have my bath and go. Just heat up a glass of milk for me.

(Goes into bathroom. Mimes bathing. Rani boils the milk. Pours it in a glass and starts to take it out. Notices the piece of root. Stops. Thinks. Runs out. Sees that he is still bathing. Runs back into the kitchen, makes a paste of the root.)

APPANNA (dressing): Milk!

(Rani jumps with fright. Hurriedly mixes the paste into the milk. Comes out and gives Appanna the glass of milk. He drinks it in a single gulp. Hands the glass back to her. Goes to the door, ready to put the lock on. She watches intently. He tries to shut the door. Suddenly clutches his head. Slides down to the floor. Stretches out and goes to sleep on the door-step, half inside and half outside the house. Rani is distraught. Runs to him. Shakes him. He doesn't wake up. He is in deep sleep. She tries to drag him into the house, but he is too heavy for her. She sits down and starts crying.)

APPANNA (groggily): Water! Water!

(She brings a pot of water. Splashes it on his face. He wakes up slowly, staggers up. Washes his face. Pushes her in. Locks the door from outside. Goes away. Rani watches, stunned. Slowly goes back to her bedroom. Starts talking to herself. It becomes night.) (p. 263).

Then suddenly Appanna regains consciousness and asks for water in an indistinct manner. She brings a pot of water and splashes it on his face. He washes his face regains consciousness and pushes Rani inside the house. He locks the door from the outside and goes away, leaving Rani stunned. She goes back to her room and starts fantasising again about a demon locking up a beautiful damsel in his castle. It rains for seven days and seven nights and the sea floods the city.

The waters breakdown the door of the castle and a big whale comes to her rescue. Kurudavva concluded that it is no ordinary infatuation that Appanna has for his concubine:

KURUDAVVA: That's bad. This is no ordinary infatuation then. That concubine of his is obviously-

RANI: Who?

KURUDAVVA: Didn't want to tell you. There is a woman, a bazaar woman. She has your husband in her clutches. Squeezes him dry. Maybe she's cast a spell. There is only one solution to this-

RANI: What?

KURUDAVVA (giving her the bigger piece): Feed him this largest piece.

RANI: No!

KURUDAVVA: Yes!

RANI: That little piece made him sick. This one-

KURUDAVVA: It will do good, believe me. This is not hearsay. I am telling you from my own experience. Go in. Start grinding it. Make a tasty curry. Mix the paste in it. Let him taste a spoonful and he will be your slave. And then? Just say the word and he will carry you to my house himself.(Rani blushes.) (pp. 264-265)

Karnad accentuated the unstable location of woman in our society; and poignantly brings out not only the social and cultural prejudices but also the severe consequences that they have on the human psyche. Indian society that binds individuals by duties, denying all space for self development, and every individual in the case of a woman, reduces Rani to a chattel after her marriage. She is to keep house-keep and cook. Appanna, a typically possessive male prevents her from having acquaintances, cuts her off from all possible communications by bringing home a watch dog and later a mongoose. Excluded and alienated from all communication and enjoyment, Rani is expected to be occupied only with the house work within her confinement. As a result of years of conditioning, Rani accepts her subjugation submissively and acquiescently. Rani's mother is portrayed in the same light as voiceless woman against the structure, who began to weep as soon as Rani grew up. Rani says:

RANI: Mother started shedding tears the day I matured and was still crying when I left with my husband. Poor her! She is probably crying even now.(Starts sobbing.)(p. 259)

The first intake of the root fails to lure Appanna. Rani finds that the paste of the second turns blood red in colour. She is afraid to administer it to her husband and throws it upon the ant-hill, the abode of the cobra. The snake accepts the libation and decides to visits her. The folk rite is made to stand on its head here and the gesture is mistaken for a fact. The love philtre cannot be inefficacious and the snake falls in love with Rani with the help of sorceresses is often sought by village girls to lure the men they desire. Kurudavva will not rest till her 'vasikarangulika' (tablets for enslavement) take effect and Rani becomes a true wife. The play describes its protagonist Rani's gradual transformation from a bond slave wife to the master of her house and husband. She represents and undergoes the kind of oppression and suffocation that every Indian woman suffers in the male dominated social setup. Her husband Appanna locks her into a house and treats her as a bond slave who has nothing else to do but to wait and cook for him. He isolates her from the world outside and denies her status not only as a wife but also of an individual. She is not allowed to establish any contact with the world. He keeps a dog to prevent the outsiders approaching her. Rani tends to be a sincere wife as well as a virtuous daughter. When Appanna faints on being given the mixture of root, she starts crying as a typical traditional wife she cannot think of anything harmful for her husband despite the fact that he is never sincere to her. In order

to counter this male chauvinistic vision, Karnad adopts a strange device in which a king cobra gets sexually involved with Rani. Kurudavva gives her the second bigger root to be ground into a paste and mixed with the curry Rani cooks for Appanna. But Rani mixes the paste in the curry, there is a loud explosion and the curry turns blood red. Unwilling to serve it to her husband, Rani pours it into an ant-hill. A king cobra residing in the ant-hill partakes of Rani's love portion and falls in love with her. The mixture happens to fall upon the ant-hill within which lives a king cobra, Naga. He tasted the love portion and falls in love with her. He assumes the shape of her husband and starts visiting her every night. Rani is under the impression that it is her husband Appanna and comes to visit her at night while Appanna is away, spending time with his mistress. Rani is under the impression that it is her husband, and not Naga who comes and makes love to her every night. She, however, is mystified while his behaviour is so radically different during the day as it is at night. Rani's dilemma continues to plague her. Naga takes pity on Rani for her pathetic condition and showers parental affection on her. All her pent-up sorrow bursts out. It is seen their conversation:

NAGA: You are very beautiful.

RANI (startled): Hm? What? Do you –want something?

NAGA: No. I said you are very beautiful. Poor thing!

RANI: That a tender bud like you should get such a rotten husband.

RANI: I didn't say anything!

NAGA: you didn't. I am saying it. Did it hurt-the beating this morning?

RANI: No.

NAGA: Locked up in the house all day... You must be missing your parents.

RANI (struggles to hold back a sob): No.

NAGA: They doted on you, didn't they?

(She suddenly bursts out into a fit of weeping.)

NAGA (startled): What is it?

(Rani continues to howl.)

I know,you want to see your parents, don't you? All right. I'll arrange that.

(She looks at him dumbfounded.)

Truly. Now, smile Just a bit. Look, I'll send you to them only if you smile now.

(Rani tries to smile. A new outburst of barking from the dog.)

Oh! Does this dog carry on like that all night? How long is it since you have had a good night's sleep?(p. 268).

Rani cannot comprehend the situation since Appanna cannot be so affectionate and compassionate. Yet she willingly suspends her disbelief and enjoys the concern and affection of Naga who is in the guise of Appanna. She feels happy and secure in his company. She becomes bold enough to talk to him and falls asleep in his embrace. Naga is happy about his success he lays her gently down on the bed. He becomes cobra and leaves. Appanna comes in the morning next day. He unlocks the door and steps in. Rani comes out running and laughing obviously thinking that her hardships have ended as Appanna has changed for better. She learns that she is wrong. She thinks that she is dreaming again when she sees her husband:

APPANNA: Hello, friend! No intruders tonight, eh?

(He unlocks the door and steps in. At the noise of the door, Rani comes out running. She is laughing.)

RANI: But when did you go away? I'm...

(Freezes when she sees the expression of distaste on his face.)

APPANNA: Yes?

RANI: Oh! Nothing.

APPANNA: Good.

(Goes to the bathroom. Rani stares after him, then returns to the kitchen.)

RANI: I must have been dreaming again-

(Appanna bathes, then eats silently as usual and leaves. It grows dark. Night. Rani lies in bed, wide awake. A long silence. The cobra comes out of the ant-hill and enters the darkened front yard of her house. The dog suddenly begins to bark. Then, sounds of the dog growling and fighting, mixed with his hiss of snake. The racket ends when the dog gives a long, painful howl and goes silent. Rani rushes to the window to see what is happening. It is dark. She cannot see anything. When silence restored, she returns to her bed. The Cobra enters the house through the drain and becomes Naga. In the bathroom, he washes blood off his cheeks and shoulder and goes to Rani's room. When she hears his step on the stair, she covers her head with the sheet. Naga comes, sees her, smiles, sits on the edge of her bed. Waits. She peeps out, sees him, close her eyes tight.) (pp. 270-271).

She thus becomes frigid again. Appanna as a male-chauvinist thinks that he has right to do whatever he likes and whatever he does is always right. He is insensitive to the feelings of others. Of course he, like many men who are slaves of patriarchal culture, is only playing the role expected of him. He will be so until somebody or something opens his eyes to the reality. The male assumption of keeping full control over the body, sexuality and virtue of women through the institution of family and values like chastity, are mocked in the story, in the play where the absent husband finds his substitute wooing his wife and taking his place. The woman's experience of her desires dreams and ability to find means of satisfying them is expressed in the story, creating laughter with the ingression of the snake into her life transformation begins. Rani, frigid, shy abhors sex as a sin, turns to Naga for love. He not only gives her love but initiates her into conjugal love by telling her that it is a universal phenomenon:

NAGA (laughs): what have dogs done to deserve sole credit for it, you silly goose? Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, crabs, ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows- even the geese! The female begins to smell like the wet earth. And stung by her smell, the King Cobra starts searching for his queen. The tiger bellows for his mate. When the flame of forest blossoms into a fountain of red and the earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the banyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood, in the flow of the estuary, the dark limestone caves from the womb of the heavens to the dark netherworlds, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms-everywhere, those who come together, cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there, everywhere. (p. 276).

The beautiful irony has been created by the incessant talk of cobra and Rani. Rani says to cobra(Naga):

RANI: You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a... stupid snake.

(Naga laughs.)

It's all very well for you to laugh. I feel like crying. (p. 271).

The irony remains intact throughout the play. It could be seen in the beginning when Rani throws the juice of medicinal root on the ant-hill and it is devoured by the King Cobra. Kurudavva

seems to be another aspect of the same woman striving in everyday to harmonize with her man. Her blindness seems to carry a deeper meaning and that is inability of the female community to peep into the heart of the truth. The alienation and communication gap between Rani and Appanna, Rani's longing for the fulfilment comes to the climax with the disclosure of her pregnancy. Naga starts visiting her during night and Appanna during day. Its brilliant blending of dream and reality and Rani seems to dream during the day for the dream like reality of the night and is traumatised by the nightmare like reality of the day during the night. She could not make anything of Naga's statement:

NAGA: Of course. There's always that. (Pause) Listen, Rani. I shall come home every day twice. At night and of course again at mid-day. At night, wait for me here in this room. When I come and go at night, don't go out of this room, don't look out of the window- whatever the reason. And don't ask me why.

RANI: No, I won't. The pig, the whale, the eagle- none of them asks why. So I won't either. But they ask for it again. So I can too, can't I?

(Runs to him and embraces him.)

While the above scene is in progress, Kurudavva and Kappanna have arrived outside. As usual, he lowers her to the ground and sits under the tree. She goes to the door. Stumbles over the dog. Surprised, she feels it, make sure it is dead. Feels the lock on the door. Calls out in a whisper (pp. 276-277).

A close reading Naga-Mandala reminds us of the Kerala Naga cult and the evocation of the cult experience makes us accept the possibility of a Naga becoming a performer and the performer becoming the Naga in the ritualistic and aesthetic performance space. In other words, the physical experience of the Naga cult trance dance makes us accept the theatrical concept of transformation as a possible dimension of reality. This knowledge is one's reading of the play. Appanna who notices Kurudavva and her son near about the house, keeps a watch dog. Later he keeps a mongoose to keep off the snake. Naga destroys both the watch-posts by killing them. Rani becomes pregnant and she thinks she has conceived for her husband Appanna. The husband comes in on her secret eventually and accuses her of infidelity. She is put to test in the presence of the village elders. Karnad relates the play with the psycho-social reality only. Karnad observes:

The position of Rani in the story of Naga-Mandala, for instance, 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 relationships. She is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into.⁴

Rani, who represents a typical Hindu wife, is a victim of severe repression and alienation. M. Sarat Babu says:

This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of the middle ages, the reduction of women's talents to house work and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment.⁵

The arrival of Naga in the darkness of night creates the superb conflict. Karnad uses the folk tale to expose the psychological divide of a person. Naga, a cobra being the age long symbol of male sexuality very easily projects the truth and the inner conflict of the protagonist. Naga talks in a very honeyed way and it is an enigma for Rani to accommodate with two selves that are Appanna and Naga. This trauma is a particularisation of this common truth that every husband is

sweet and soothing during the darkness of night, harsh and bullying during the light of the day. Naga in the form of Appanna says:

NAGA: No, let's say, the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits. So I won't come at night if you don't want me to. (p. 277).

Act one ends with a brief narrative speech of the Story. She says that cobra can assume any form it likes, that night it enters into the house through the bath drain and takes the shape of Appanna. In the rest of the play, the cobra in the guise of Appanna is called Naga. The events which take place in the second act may be seen both from the temporal as well as the spiritual point of view. Karnad says in an interview:

In our homes women folk speak a lot when they serve food. They have freedom to speak only in the kitchen and in the bedroom. The reason probably is they give food and sex. It's only there that a man sits and receives when the woman gives.⁶

The human predicament and the need to live by fiction and half truth, is the complex theme of Karnad's play Naga-Mandala, where the female protagonist Rani exhibits the dilemma in the life of an Indian woman. Despite the physical and mental tortures given to her by her husband, she is not ready to break away from moral compunction. The only expectation she cherishes is the loving husband at night. She gets that acceptance from Appanna-the cobra and feels elated. All her grudges are forgotten and she is quite complacent as she realises her motherhood. Till her trail she has the conviction that her husband is the instrument in giving her the feeling of completeness. It is interesting to note here that without disturbing the base of socio-moral structure of faith prevailing in our society, Karnad provides three probable ends to the play. The first is the expected one, the second is wishful thinking but the third is to bring woman's identity into focus. Rani accepts the half-truth on realising that it was more else but the cobra who made her attain motherhood at the end of the play, therefore she saves cobra from Appanna, her husband. S. R. Jalota observes:

It leads the audience to reflect on the efficacy of the social laws which discriminate a woman from a man and which demand a wife's faithfulness even to her callous husband.⁷

Myths of gender bring about supremacy of males over females and most of these are focused on female chastity and sexuality. The myth of 'Agni Pariksha' is one such myth, which Karnad uses in his Naga-Mandala. We find that myths are deep-rooted in the psyche of the whole society and they are created either to serve some function or to explain the mysterious and natural phenomenon. The divine myths explaining the natural and divine powers are the reflections of human thoughts and superstitions. In Naga-Mandala, Karnad explores Indian themes, and experiments with Indian mythological heritage. The title itself is full of tantric and mythical connotations. Sarat Babu observes:

Mandala is a tantric concept indicating inner concentration, a source of energy. Naga-Mandala is a magic-religious ritual invoking Naga, the cobra king and a snake god of Hindus, who grants the wishes of his devotees, especially the wish for fertility.⁸

The play raises the issue of adultery, chastity and the patriarchal moral code which believes in the loyalty of a woman but not of a man to his wife. No hue and cry is raised when Appanna commits adultery openly and intentionally but Rani who does the same by mistake in utter ignorance and unknowingly taking the transformed self of Naga in the form of her husband who nightly visits her. She is not only publicly humiliated and asked to face the tradition ordeal of holding a hot iron rod or dip her hands into hot oil, to prove her chastity. Her husband accuses her of infidelity and calls her a whore. Chastity is virtue valued by patriarchal culture in India

from times immemorial. It is use of the most powerful yet invisible cultural fetter that has enslaved women for ages. The Ramayana in which Sita undergoes the fire-ordeal to prove her chastity to Rama has been a cultural guide to Indians for thousands of years. The concept of chastity goes with and gets its support from another morbid concept that sex is mean and sinful. The transformation of Naga from a cobra is reminiscent of Satan's becoming a snake and then Satan again in the Christian mythology. The only difference between the two is that mythical Saturn gets transformed into a snake with the ill intention of misguiding Eve, the mother of mankind, but in Naga-Mandala, cobra takes the shape of Naga out of love and affection for Rani. He tries to give her all happiness and every night when he meets. However, all this happens under the magical influence of the root giving to Rani by Kurudavva. The nightly meetings of Naga and Rani continued to the extent of her becoming pregnant. The conversation of Naga and Rani reveals this:

RANI: I am pregnant.

(He stares at her, dumbfounded.)

Why are you looking at me like that? There is a baby in my womb.

(He stares blankly.)

We are going to have a baby.

(Pause)

It doesn't make you happy?

(Anguished) What am I going to do with you? Laugh? Cry? Bang my head against the wall? I can never guess how you'll react. I thought you would dance with joy on hearing the news. That you would whirl me around and fondle me. Feel my stomach gently and kiss me. All that-

(Pause)

Actually, I was also afraid you might not do anything of the sort. That's why I hid the news from you all these months. I can't make any sense of you even when it is just the two of us. Now the third life joins us! I didn't know if that would be too much for you. So I was silent.

(Her eyes fill up.)

What I feared has come true. What kept me silent has happened. You are not happy about the baby. You are not proud that I am going to be a mother. Sometimes you are so cold-blooded-you cannot be human.

(Forcibly puts his hand on her belly.)

Just feel! Feel! Our baby is crouching in there, in the darkness, listening to the sounds from the world outside- as I do all day long. (pp. 282-283)

When Naga takes her into his arms, Rani feels the blood on his cheeks and shoulders. Then she detects some tooth marks where the dog had bitten him. Rani goes to look for the ointment her mother has given her for wounds. When she opens the mirror box in which she has kept, she doesn't see Naga's reflection in the mirror. She is scared and cries out but Naga quickly pulls her away from the mirror and embraces her while the superstitious Rani continues crying. Naga shuts the mirror box and pushes it away:

RANI: Wait. Let me apply that ointment Mother gave me. Where is it? I took it out the other day when I cut my thumb slicing onions. Where did I put it? Oh, yes! The mirror-box!

(She rushes to the mirror-box and opens it. Before Naga can move away so Rani won't see his reflection, she looks at him in the mirror. Screams in fright. He moves with lightening speed, pulls her away from the mirror and holds her in his arms. She is trembling.)

NAGA: What is it? What is it, Rani?

(He gently shuts the mirror-box and pushes it away. Rani turns and looks at where he had been sitting.)

RANI: When I looked in the mirror, I saw there-where you were sitting-instead of you, I saw a-

(Mimes a cobra hood with her fingers.)

-sitting there.

NAGA: What? A cobra?

RANI (silencing him): Shh! Don't mention it. They say if you mention it by name at night, it comes into the house.

NAGA: All right. Suppose a cobra does come into this house...

RANI: Don't! Why are you tempting fate by calling that unmentionable thing by its name?

NAGA: ...why shouldn't it come with love?

RANI: May God bless our house and spare us that calamity. The very thought makes me shudder.

NAGA: I am here now. Nothing more to fear.

(They sit on bed together.) (pp. 272-273).

Rani enjoys Naga's company so much that she wants the night to last forever, as though she was in search of *carpe diem*. For her the day is the unmasked, while the night brings her masked delight. Naga suffers from the pangs of separation like a human lover when the villagers unite Rani with her husband after she goes through the snake's ordeal. Realising too well that he could no longer assume Appanna's form and as a snake could not have a human mistress, he decides to end his life so that his lover might live in happiness. Sex between and non human militates against nature. In the play Rani is hypnotised by the look in the eyes of Naga, whom she mistakes it for her husband Appanna. Naga kisses her and they make love. The Flames surround them and sing the song of the Flames:

Flames: Come let us dance
through the weaver-bird's nest
and lights the hanging lamps
of glow-worms
through the caverns in the ant-hill
and set the diamond
in the cobra's crown ablaze
through the blind woman's dream
through the deaf-mute's song
Come let us flow
Down the tresses of time
all light and song. (p. 274).

She has apparently and thoroughly enjoyed the love making session but complains:

RANI: I said be quite.

(Pause)

I didn't know you were such a bad man. I should have known the moment you started using honeyed words.

(Pause)

Had I known, I would never have agreed to marry you. What will Father and Mother say if they come to know?

NAGA: They will say: 'Good! Our daughter is following nicely in our footsteps-'

RANI (exploded): Quite! I warn you, I am your wife and you don't have answer anyone about me. But I will not have you say such things about my parents. They are not like... like... like dogs! (p. 275-276).

Naga in the form of Appanna waxes eloquent on the all-pervading urge for love-making in all animate and inanimate creatures on earth. This surprises Rani:

RANI: Goodness! Goats have to be sacrificed and buffaloes slaughtered to get a word out of you in the mornings. But at night-how you talk! Snakes and lizards may do what they like, but human beings should have some sense of shame. (p. 276).

When Kurudavva asks Rani about her marital life, Rani blushing replies in the affirmative. Kurudavva is pleased to learn that her love potion has had its effect. Kurudavva before her departure from that place strictly advises Rani about the reptiles. The Story narrates the following:

STORY: The death of dog infuriated Appanna. He next brought a mongoose. The mongoose lasted only one day. But it had evidently given a tougher fight: its mouth was full of blood. There were bits of flesh under its claws. Bits of snakeskin were found in its teeth.

Rani fainted when she saw the dead mongoose. That night he did not visit her. There was no sign of him the next fifteen days. Rani spent her nights crying, wailing, pining for him. When he started visiting again, his body was covered with wounds which had only partly healed. 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.

(It gets dark on stage. Rani hurriedly lights the lamps in the house.) (p. 281)

The main plot and sub plot are harmoniously synthesised by the playwright. The Kurudavva and Kappanna episode focuses on the other aspect of the human relationship. Kurudavva, the mother is blind and she needs her son as a support but the son is hypnotised from a female voice. Karnad appears to express the crushed sexual self through the character of Kappanna. Kappanna seems to be traumatized by the horrible aspect of women. From his infantile on world he has seen the woman as a mother only so the other aspect of woman horrifies him. Kappanna and Kurudavva converse:

KURUDAVVA (panicky): Kappanna! What is it? Why do you act like this? Kappanna-
(He suddenly wakes up.)

KAPPANNA: Eh? Nothing.

KURUDAVVA: What do you mean nothing? Giving me a scare like that-

KAPPANNA: You won't believe me if I tell you. It was her again-

KURUDAVVA: Why shouldn't I believe you if you talked sense? Just admit it's one of the girls from a nearby village, instead of making up fancy stories about some-

KAPPANNA: She is not a village girl. Which village girl will dare step out at this hour? And I am not making up stories. That day she floated out from the haunted well. Just now she stepped out of the cemetery. Looked at me. Smiled and waved.

KURUDAVVA: Perhaps she is an ogress. Of demon birth. Or someone from the netherworld, perhaps. A spirit. Why don't you just say who it is-

KAPPANNA: You won't let me-

KURUDAVVA: When you talk like this I feel we are falling apart. It's a fear I have never felt before.

KAPPANNA: Mother, just listen-

KURUDAVVA: Shut up now!

(They exist, arguing. It gets brighter. It is mid-day. Appanna enters Sees the dead dog.)
(pp. 279-280).

Karnad is akin to Shakespeare in his universality and examination of man-woman relationship. His concept of human completeness is a bit like that of Shakespeare as set out in *The Tempest*, from where Shakespeare makes his point of ending is the Karnad's point of beginning. Shakespeare does not dare to violate the sanctity of marital bond. When her real husband Appanna discovers her pregnancy he tortures her and does not hesitate to refer the matter to village elders. The play exposes the discrimination against women:

ELDER II: It brings no credit to the village to have a husband publicly question his wife's chastity. But Appanna here says: since the day of our wedding, I have not once touched my wife or slept by her side. And yet she is pregnant. He has registered the complaint, so we must judge its merits. (p. 288).

The elders of the village do not reflect on Appanna's brutal treatment of Rani, nor his relation with the concubine questioned. Rani's voiceless surrender to the system gains her no acclaim. A man needs no explanation for indulgence in essential pleasures, but in the case of a woman, her natural response to her instincts is regarded as a transgression of ethical codes, that is either a punishable offense or requires a justification by supernatural validation. Karnad employs the oath-taking ceremony to reallocate the power centre in a proto-type Indian wife-husband relationship. When Rani, after being deemed a goddess, accepts the social role of being Appanna's wife, she becomes the principal partner wholly aware of her role and status, assertive in her thoughts and decisions. The play thus traces the development of Rani from a withdrawn submissive girl to a mature woman cognizant of her position. And in the process of doing so, exposes the hollow sham of the society.

The self-assurance that Rani achieves can be allied to motherhood. It might be said that in the socio-cultural ethos of India, the only way that a woman can achieve recognition is through motherhood. The play can be read as a psychological play of a split personality with Appanna as a typical male, insensitive and selfish by day that becomes the Naga with all its phallic connotations and can accept himself without his inhibitions only at night. It can also be seen as Rani's dual perception of her husband, during day time as selfish and brutal operating within the dictates of a malicious society, and another at night as a lover. This intrinsic ambiguity that opens up multiple readings makes the play all the more intriguing. There is another point of view. The myth symbolises the breaking of barriers, the crossing of the lines intended to imprison a woman and curb her. It is Naga who initiates Rani to the path of transformation. A portent of societal revolution, he engenders a conversion not only in Rani but also puts to question the society's age-old traditions. Rani's transformation from a subdued woman to one,

who is bold enough to affirm her, is a direct result of the emotional support she receives from Naga. The comfort she receives from his presence puts her to sleep like a baby in his arms on the first night. Rani's allusions to her parents ceases once she establishes a liaison with Naga. Karnad stresses love as an essential element in the growth of human beings. Rani, like every human being, needs love to grow and blossom. She gets love from Naga. Rani who is an immature girl changes into a mature girl after her coming in contact with Naga. Naga's love makes her realise her real self. Rani, who has remained silent since the very first day, finally breaks her silence when Naga asks her to keep her pregnancy a secret. Her speech shows that she is no more an immature girl. She breaks the patriarchal authority which gives the right of speaking only to man

RANI (blankly): Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No. I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The snarl in the morning unrelated to the caress at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you.
(He is silent.)

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not parrot. Not a cat or sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit-I could bear it. But now-sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!

(Naga opens his mouth to say something.) (pp. 283-284).

The play exposes the double standards of morality in society regarding man and woman. The whole village knows the fact that Appanna is having an extra-marital affair but this is ignored by everyone. The village elders asked Rani to pass chastity test either by holding red-hot iron or cobra in her hand. Rani holds cobra in her hand who is actually Naga and confesses that she has touched no male other than her husband and this cobra. The scene shifts to the village square now. On Appanna's complaint, the three elders of the village come and take their positions near the ant-hill. A crowd of villagers gathers around to hear their verdict on a husband publicly expressing doubts over his wife's chastity. Appanna says that he has not touched Rani since the day of their marriage and yet she is pregnant. The traditional test in their village has been for the accused to take the oath of chastity while holding a red-hot iron in hand. Occasionally the accused has opted for putting her hand in boiling oil to prove her chastity. But Rani insists on swearing by the king cobra. They advise her to go through the ordeal of the red-hot iron, but Rani insists that she must swear by the king cobra and they give in. She steps up to the ant-hill followed by the crowd. The cobra rears its head out of the ant-hill. Rani expresses her fear in the presence of the elders. Elder III warns her:

ELDER III: Listen to us even now. If something goes wrong and the Cobra bites you, not just your life but the life of the child you carry will be in jeopardy. We risk the sin of killing your unborn child. (p. 288).

When the cobra rears its hood out of the ant-hill, the crowd in a state of fear steps back. When the confusion ensues Kurudavva enters. Her son disappeared a week ago. She says:

KURUDAVVA: If only I had eyes! I would have seen her. I would have recognized. But what can one do with these pebbles? 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? Go away!' Suddenly the

door burst open. The rushing wind shook the rafters. He slipped from my hands and was gone. Never came back. (p. 291).

Rani expressed her innocence by taking an oath. She changes her mind. She wants the ordeal by the cobra. Before putting her hand into the ant-hill Rani says that if she has done unlawful and immoral thing the snake will surely punish her by biting her. She has not touched anyone of the male sex except her husband and that king cobra. She is certain that the king cobra would bite her the moment she touched it and she would meet the same fate as the dog and the mongoose that Appanna had brought home earlier to guard her and keep meddlers like the blind woman Kurudavva away. Rani is permitted for the snake ordeal. She goes to the ant-hill, plunges her hand into it and pulls the cobra out. Before she pulls the cobra out of the ant-hill she swears:

RANI: And this Cobra.

(Suddenly words pour out.)

Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the cobra bite me.

(The cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gasps. The cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. Music fills the skies. The light changes into a soft, luminous glow. Rani stares uncomprehending as the Cobra slips back into the ant-hill. There are hosannas and cheers from the crowd.) (p. 292).

The cobra does not bite her. To the utter surprise of all, it shades up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. It is nothing short of a miracle and the village elders declare her to be a goddess incarnate. They enjoin Appanna to take her back, treat her as a goddess and serve her for the rest of his life. Appanna's heart is full of remorse. He falls at his wife's feet. The Story's ameliorated ending considers Naga as a lover who after having given Rani everything he could in a touching soliloquy longs for her tresses which being without sensations will not disturb her dream. But for Naga as a lover that will suffice. Naga finally hides in the form of snake in Rani's abundant hair and dies. Rani now confident and assertive avers that her son has been given the gift of life by cobra as a father. She settles that Naga has to be ritually cremated and that her son would perform rituals to commemorate his death every year. Appanna now is ensnared in the society's net:

APPANNA: Of course, there is no question of saying no. You are goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out. (p. 298).

Appanna cannot comprehend what is happening to him. His concubine shunned the evil and becomes a servant of Rani. Now, Rani is a free bird. She enjoys a happy and contented marital life with Appanna her husband. But Naga cannot forget her. He merges into her long tresses. He becomes a part of her for he cannot bear her absence, nor can he permanently assume a human form so as to be with her forever. Naga presses Rani's hair to his body, ties a noose and strangles himself to death. When Rani combs her hair later a dead cobra falls to the ground. It is cremated and her son lights the funeral pyre. The second ending shows Naga alive in Rani's tresses. The completeness of Rani happens after the snake trial and after she is able to take her own decisions. The search is not so much for completeness but is identification of her body and its needs. Now she becomes a full-fledged woman only towards the end of two endings of the play. The play is a perfect journey of a woman from her tortured, battered soul and towards a unified whole in the end. Karnad's aim is not to instruct, but only to delight. The play ends with the re-entry of Naga

in the night while Rani sleeping with her husband and son. When Appanna runs into kitchen for a stick Rani says to Naga:

RANI (softly, to the Cobra): You? What are you doing here? He'll kill you. Go. Go away. No! Not that way. He's there. What shall we do? What shall we do? Why did you ever come back here, stupid? (Suddenly) My hair! Of course, come, quick. Climb into it.

(She lets her hair down to the floor.)

Quick now. Get in. Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?

(Appanna comes in with a stick.)

It went that way-towards the bathroom.

(Appanna rushes out of the bedroom, towards the bathroom, looking for the snake. Rani pats her hair.)

This hair is the symbol of my wedding bliss. Live in there happily, forever.

(Picks the baby up. Turns to the Man, gives him a thumbs-up sign. Walks out triumphant.

It gets brighter. The Flames disappear, one by one.

We are back in the inner sanctum of the temple. The man is sitting alone. He looks up. Sunlight pours in through the cracks in the temple roofs. It is morning. The man vigorously stretches himself, bows to the audience and goes out.) (pp. 299-300).

In the end Rani comes to know that the cobra had played a major part in her life, made her a real wife and bestowed motherhood on her. Rani is the example of a woman who after having been subjected to fierce subjugation, finally emerges triumphant and is able to tone down her cruel husband. The patriarchal form of society might be challenged and changed if the women folk keep getting suppressed. Girish Karnad has in a way warned the society of dire consequences if it does not mend its ways with its women. Naga-Mandala is the most imaginative and well-crafted play. It exposes the nature of story-telling and the nature of desire, and their interweaving relationship. It stands for the woman's right to make her choice and it is open to a variety of interpretations.

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