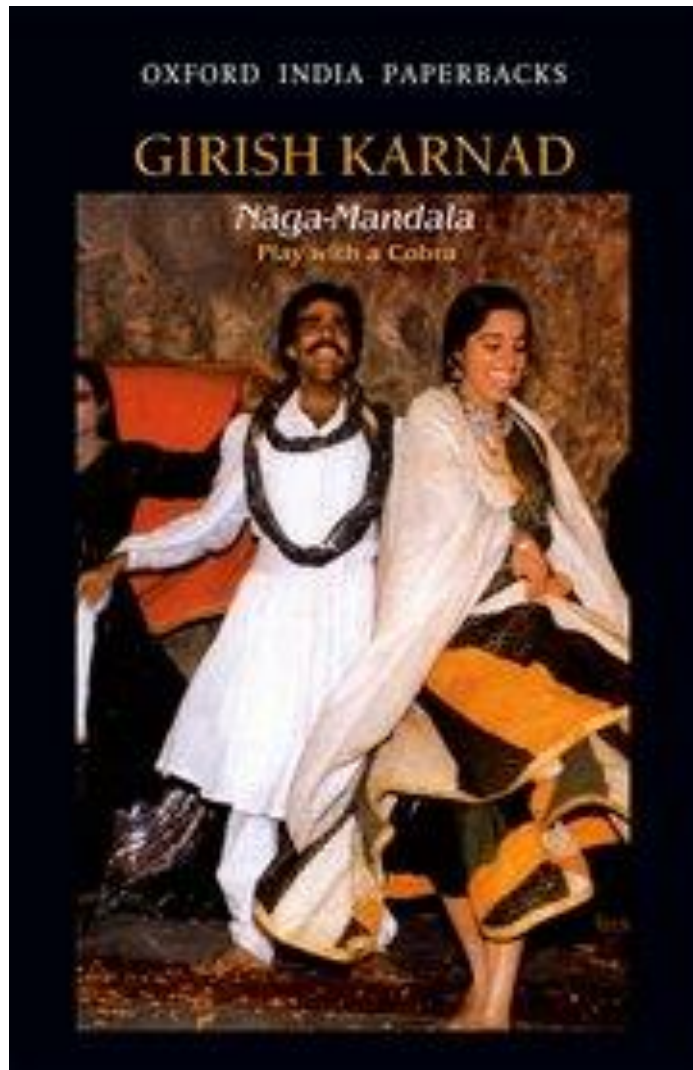


**Cultural Analysis of Indian Women in a Patriarchal Society:
Trajectory of a Woman's Emancipation in Girish Karnad's
*Naga-Mandala***

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Abstract

I here discuss how Girish Karnad illustrates Indian patriarchy and the control of women in his play, *Naga-Mandala* (1988). For this purpose I have analysed the character of Rani (female protagonist), her oppression by Appanna, her husband, and finally her trajectory from a

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subaltern figure to an emancipated woman. I have studied her character by analysing the character of Appanna as it is difficult to discuss oppression without exploring the role of an oppressor. *Naga-Mandala* focuses on gender narratives and their presentations through cultural perspectives.

Key words: Girish Karnad, *Naga Mandala*, Indian patriarchy

The Status of Women in Patriarchy

In a patriarchal society, men are given superior status and women are expected to do menial chores while discovering their individuality only through the eyes of men around them. Women in such a society are brought up in such a way that they never see themselves as independent respectable individuals.

Mary Wollstonecraft as early as 1792 in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* argued that women were not less capable than men in intellect and therefore women's suppression was uncalled for and unreasonable (Sukheeja 260). Yet, in today's Indian patriarchal society, it is observed that men practice double standards. They enjoy privileges which they deny to women.

According to Chris Weedon, a society becomes patriarchal where women's interests are subordinated to those of men (Weedon n.pag.). Similarly, for Michael Barret in a patriarchy, women are considered to be the sexual property of men and chaste mothers of their children (Sukheeja 262).

Rani as a Subaltern Woman in *Naga-Mandala*

Naga-Mandala is largely concerned with psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by modern Indian men and women in their marital relations. Rani is the only daughter of her parents, whose name means 'Queen. Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses', and queen of her parents' house (Karnad, "Three Plays" 27). Appanna, literally meaning 'any man' marries Rani and locks her up (Sunitha 54). He comes home just to eat his lunch and remains there for a while but without having any dialogue with his new wife. He neither talks to her nor allows her to ask any question. He says, 'Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28) However, he enjoys full freedom in going daily to his concubine.

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Rani is like any woman who goes to her husband's house with sweet dreams and desires of living a blissful marital life. But she has to face another reality. For Appanna, there are no social, moral or traditional limitations. He stays free and unquestionable. Karnad highlights the issue that orthodox patriarchal society and its social laws demand commitment and loyalty from a wife even to a treacherous and callous husband.

Rani in *Naga-Mandala* represents a subaltern woman in a society that is run by men. The play not only exposes the ugliness of patriarchal society but also how women are socialised to internalise the reigning patriarchal system. They condone male power and denigrate their own sex and cooperate in their own subservience. In the play, Rani's father arranges her marriage with a parentless young boy with plenty of wealth, but Rani's choice is clearly ignored, assuming that she is not capable of taking any decision regarding her marriage. She has no say. Soon after marriage, Rani realises that Appanna is not a human being in true terms. He oppresses Rani and ignores her existence as a human being.

Appanna's cruel instincts come to the fore the very first day of his marriage when he goes out to see his mistress, locking up Rani in the house with the words: '... I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 27). He neither states why and where he goes to nor does Rani have the courage to question his nocturnal visits.

Isolation and Neglect

Appanna's locking Rani up in the play signifies the entire patriarchal discourse of chastity which is used to hold and control women's urges. This solitary confinement symbolizes 'the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment' (Babu 239). Rani's position can be seen as a demonstration of a young girl's situation who marries into a family where she does not live alone with her husband but with other relations of her husband under the same roof. While she lives with other family members of her in-laws, an Indian girl sees her husband in two incongruent roles – as a stranger during the day and as lover/snake at night. The men in a conservative Indian patriarchal society are criticised and considered unmanly if they are nice to their wives in public. Therefore, the men perform two roles simultaneously after their marriage. Sometimes it is difficult for the brides to understand their husbands acting strangely but they learn with the passage of time. Similarly, the form of relationships Rani has to create from these disjointed encounters with her husband look incredible to her and she finds it perplexing to link them together. The empty house Rani is

locked in could be the family she is married into. This empty house also indicates that Rani's life is empty of any emotional sustenance. She feels herself confined within the walls and experiences helplessness. Karnad constructs a story of social and ethical differences between human agents, and how these agents treat the feminine world and subjugate it.

In a patriarchal system, the husband is meant to provide security and safety for his wife, but in *Naga-Mandala*, it is the husband who engenders a sense of insecurity and fear in Rani. She feels 'frightened' being 'alone at night', preoccupied with her thoughts of insecurity, but Appanna, instead of providing her with any comfort and support, aggressively interrogates her: 'What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you...' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28) Rani gives vent to her distress, but Appanna hushes her with unpleasant words: 'Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28)

In a conventional Indian marital relationship, the husband enjoys all privileges to give orders and does not tolerate his wife arguing with him. Being helpless, Rani suppresses her longings – sexual, social, and psychological. Appanna betrays Rani by indulging in sensual pleasure with his concubine. Rani knows all, but tolerates passively.

Symbolism, Dreams, and Fantasies

Rani, as a victim of cruelty and seclusion, seeks refuge in the realm of dreams and hallucinations. She fantasises that she has been carried away by an eagle far from Appanna's world. She asks the eagle: 'Where are you taking me?' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 27). The eagle answers 'Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28). Then Rani asks him again: 'Do they? Then please, please take me to them...' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28). While dreaming she falls asleep and moans: '*Oh, Mother!*' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28). But her imagined world does not last long because very soon she confronts hard realities of life. When she wakes up, she finds herself in a locked house. Rani's dreams uncover the inner working of her mind and her personal desires that are restrained in her consciousness. The Eagle symbolizes flight and freedom which represents Rani's desire to get free from Appanna's clutches.

Rani dreams that she is in the company of her parents: 'Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her... "Don't worry," they assure her, "We won't let you go away again ever!"' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28). But in reality they do not come to protect her

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from her cruel husband. She also imagines that a 'stag with the golden antlers comes to the door... he explains, "I am a prince"' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 28). It is evident that like any young girl, she wanted a prince to take her away from her parents' home and make her real Rani, but instead it is Appanna, in the form of a human monster, who has taken her away and reduced her to the status of a servant. Her dreams and fantasies represent her curtailed desires and hunger for affection. Then she imagines: '...the demon locks her up in his castle' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 35). The demon is none other than Appanna who locks her up in the house. Rani's only duty is to prepare food for him. He locks her up in the house and brings home a watchdog and a mongoose to ensure her complete seclusion from society. Karnad has deliberately used the symbols of eagle and stag in Rani's dreams as the eagle, 'king of the sky', is a symbol of power and strength, and the stag is a symbol of masculinity. In *Naga-Mandala* Karnad has used animals and a bird which are beautiful and also become symbols of lust for the women in the play.

At this point, Kurudavva, a blind and aged woman, comes to her rescue, but her service to Rani appears restricted in time and space. Rani tells Kurudavva: '...you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 35). Kurudavva offers her magical roots as a remedy to win her husband back from his mistress' clutches. But the magical potion appears disastrous because as soon as Appanna consumes it; he falls on the floor and becomes unconscious. However, on Kuruddava's insistence, Rani tries a bigger root to woo her husband, but this time the curry she puts it in turns blood red. Rani is shocked, rushes stealthily out and pours it into the anthill, but this infuriates Appanna. He 'slaps her hard', and Rani 'collapses to the floor' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 38). It is important to note here that Rani feels herself nothing without Appanna. Rani, therefore, does not give Appanna the blood coloured curry even though it is assumed to have enough power to win his affection and attention. Like other Indian wives, she is concerned about her husband's safety: 'Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be?... Forgive me, God. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, Mother, how could I, your daughter, agree to such a heinous act?' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 37).

No tradition-bound Indian woman likes to see her husband die or wants to become a widow. Born and brought up in a man-made system, she is averse even to the thought of her husband's death while she remains alive because she knows that life as a widow becomes even more vulnerable. Once again, she becomes dependent on her father – if he is alive. Otherwise she becomes the responsibility of her brother. In such a situation, a brother usually considers his

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widowed sister a burden. A girl is, therefore, told from her childhood that a husband is a god for a wife, though in actuality he may be a devil. But a girl in a patriarchal society prefers living with a devil-husband over living with her brother. It is because of this upbringing that Rani pours the blood coloured curry in an ant-hill where a cobra lives. The cobra drinks it and becomes her lover. Once Naga starts staying with her at night, she stops dreaming.

Naga visits Rani at night through the drain in her bathroom and puts on the guise or mask of Appanna. Karnad has used disguise as a metaphoric mask for Appanna because from now onwards in the play, the character playing Appanna performs a double role; a husband during the day and a lover at night. This form of masking has been employed in the dramatic productions of the play as well as in its film adaptations. It is important to note that this mask/disguise is utilised to understand how Rani transforms from a subaltern figure into an emancipated woman.

Karnad has used the character playing Appanna and Naga in two different ways – first to follow the traditional story and secondly to explore women’s sexual needs. It is through the mask/disguise that the playwright shows two worlds side by side – one of the play and the other outside the play. In the world of the play, Naga starts staying with Rani during the night and gradually succeeds in breaking her frigidity and eliminating her feelings of distress and insecurity with the help of his ‘honeyed words’ (Karnad, “Three Plays” 44). Outside of the world of the play, Karnad emphasises that while Rani’s need for sex remains unfulfilled, the family life of Rani and Appanna stays troubled.

Act I ends with discussion between Rani and Naga. Rani shows her concern that if the name of snake is mentioned at night, it might appear. Naga consoles her by saying that he would protect her and she must not worry. This dialogue highlights less educated people’s beliefs in superstitions. Rani tells Naga: ‘I don’t feel afraid anymore, with you beside me’ (Karnad, “Three Plays” 44). He praises her long hair and talks about her parents, staying attentive while she speaks. Gradually, Rani falls in love with Naga and waits impatiently for him at the approach of night. When he does not come for fifteen days, she spends her nights ‘crying wailing, pining for him’ (Karnad, “Three Plays” 49). Naga entices her into sexual union, and as a result she becomes pregnant, but this turn of events invites more antagonism, insults and beatings from her husband because of course he has not actually had sex with her. Naga/Appanna at night is compassionate, gentle and caring, whereas during the day Appanna is intolerant and cruel. Rani only needs to open her mouth and he will hiss at her. There is an inversion of human and animal here. Animals are kind and loving in *Naga-Mandala*, whereas Rani’s husband is an animalistic monster. This

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shows how Karnad likes playing with the animal/human divide. It should be noted that both Appanna's do not allow Rani to ask any question, exposing male egocentric and chauvinistic dominance. Naga says: 'From tomorrow I want you to be fresh and bright when I come home at night' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 40). Rani speaks at one point:

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 face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you'. (Karnad, "Three Plays" 51)

When Rani reveals the news of her pregnancy to Appanna, he beats her, blaming her for adultery with vile words: 'Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off?' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 52). Of course Appanna is justified in questioning Rani as he knows that he has not had sex with her. She is condemned as a 'harlot' and left to be judged by the village people (Karnad, "Three Plays" 52). It is, however, important to discuss that Rani closes her eyes to her suspicions. There are certain incidents in the play when Rani suspects her night-time visitor. The first time Naga visits Rani, she accidentally sees his image in the mirror and in place of a man she sees a snake. Then later in the play Naga visits her and she finds him wounded and feels his blood 'cold' on his body. But the next day when Appanna comes home, she does not find any sign of a wound. One can question why Rani is not more curious to know the truth. She witnesses all these clues but deliberately ignores them. Karnad shows that at that time in Rani's life, it was more important for her to have a companion and a lover than to find the truth and possibly lose him. However, she presents herself as a faithful wife and declares to her husband: 'I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong!' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 52). Karnad discusses this taboo subject of extramarital affairs in *Naga-Mandala*, where the female transcends the patriarchal gender construct of an ideal wife and is thereby sexually fulfilled.

M. Sarat Babu explains that 'Women are sexually oppressed. It is reflected in the concept of chastity, a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful, yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved women for ages' (Babu 33-34). Appanna reports the pregnancy to the village elders who decide that Rani must undertake a chastity test either by putting a red hot iron on her palm or putting her hands into the cobra's ant-hill. Village elders demand proof of virtue from Rani and not from Appanna, whereas it is quite obvious that he regularly goes to his mistress, locking his wife in the house. It is only Rani who has to suffer and go through the 'snake ordeal'

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(Karnad, “Three Plays” 53). At night Naga comes and informs Rani about the elders’ judgment. She feels disgraced and begs before him to protect her. She says: ‘Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you stripping me naked in front of the whole village?... Now you can go and withdraw the complaint. Say my wife isn’t a whore’ (Karnad, “Three Plays” 53). To Rani’s shock and disillusionment, Naga expresses his helplessness at this critical moment: ‘I’m sorry, but it can’t be done’ (Karnad, “Three Plays” 53). Nevertheless, Naga suggests that she ‘undertake the snake ordeal’ and speak truth and nothing else (Karnad, “Three Plays” 53). Their dialogue reflects Rani’s dilemma as follows:

RANI. What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say my husband brought a dog and a mongoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?
NAGA. Say anything. But you must speak the truth.
RANI. And if I lie?
NAGA. It will bite you. (Karnad, “Three Plays” 54)

It is Naga who brings about major transformation in Rani. Now she becomes bold and assertive. When Naga expresses his helplessness to guard her from the chastity test, Rani reacts as follows:

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 a parrot. Not a cat or a 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! (Karnad, “Three Plays” 51)

Now Rani’s arguments also get heard in the play. Here, the playwright shifts Rani from a subaltern to the central position. Resistance has two forms: ideological and physical, and Rani shows ideological resistance at this stage.

Subaltern’s Oppression

Naga-Mandala highlights the subaltern’s oppression, role, rise, and revolution. It is the strong sense of Indian patriarchal history which has developed in Karnad a drive for social justice, a sincere consideration for the socially oppressed and the subaltern. Karnad wants to point out a social reality through his play – who is to ask Appanna to prove his innocence? Is there no moral code of conduct for males? Why is it that only women have to face all these problems?

Rani appears confused during her trial and asks for help from everyone, but her efforts prove futile. Rani is tortured by her husband's accusations of adultery, insults and finally public trial. With fright and apprehension Rani puts her hands into the anthill of cobra and vows: 'Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two... My husband... And this Cobra' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 58). The cobra instead of stinging her 'sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 58). Her audacity in going through the trial endorses the new woman's journey for emancipation. Karnad gives remedial suggestions through Rani's vows and shows his concern for the subaltern female gender through Rani's fear and embarrassment during the public trial. Through Rani, Karnad raises many questions such as why it is always women who are asked to prove their loyalty towards their husbands and not vice versa. He then leaves these questions to the audience to consider and decide. The villagers, who were keen to pronounce her a whore a minute ago, exclaim: 'A miracle! A miracle! She is not a woman! She is a Divine Being!' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 59). The villagers fall at her feet. The crowd comes forward to prostrate itself before her. They elevate her to the status of a goddess: 'Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 59). This public trial highlights patriarchy and its conventions that crush women's independence. But Rani shows that a woman's journey for emancipation has started. It is important to remind ourselves that Rani's transformation as an emancipated woman and her emerging identity is the effect of the passion, emotional support, and comfort that she receives from Naga. An ordinary rural Indian woman may consider Rani as her archetypal figure to protest against the life-denying patriarchal system and attain an equal position with men.

In the end, Appanna changes his conduct and attitude towards Rani, perhaps under the pressure of the village community or because of the pricks of his conscience. He falls at her feet and says: 'Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind...' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 59). He accepts her and her child. Now he realizes her beauty and dignity as a human being. When the dead Naga falls from her hair, Appanna says: 'Your long hair saved us' from the deadly cobra (Karnad, "Three Plays" 63). When Rani expresses her desire that the cobra 'has to be ritually cremated... the fire should be lit by our son... And every year on this day, our son should perform the rituals to commemorate its death', Appanna agrees, saying: 'Any wish of yours will be carried out' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 63). Although, she has been given the status of a goddess her wish of commemorating cobra's death make the audience wonder if she already knew who her secret

lover/Naga was. The play does indicate instances where she could have doubted the disguised Appanna/Naga at night, but she ignored these and came out of the trial cleverly. There is also a possibility that before the trial she did not know Naga's reality but after the trial she realises him as the father to her child. As she has attained a respectable position at her home after much misery, she does not want to reveal the truth about Naga to anyone but wants to repay his love by commemorating his death. Now Rani plays an active role in her marital life. She becomes assertive of her role and status, and emphatic in her thoughts and decisions.

The Dual Ending

The play has two endings – one in which the snake lover dies entrapping himself in Rani's hair and the other in which he decides to live in her tresses. Karnad in an interview with Dharwadker says that initially there was only one ending to the play, and that was where the cobra commits suicide in Rani's hair (Karnad, "New Theatre" 358). The playwright says that he narrated this story to his Bengali friend. She told Karnad that there was a Bengali version of the story in which the snake decided to live in Rani's hair. Karnad found this ending interesting as it plays upon the traditional Indian perception that all plays and stories must end happily. This ending also satisfies the audience's curiosity by showing that now Rani realises who her lover was. Rani's acceptance of Naga as her lover presents a braver and more rebellious personality. She invites Naga 'Get in [to my hair]. 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?' (Karnad, "Three Plays" 64). The tresses here connote sexuality. Naga stands for the provocation of vital energy in Rani. In this second ending, placing Naga in Rani's tresses becomes important as it gives Rani enough energy to complete her journey from innocence to experience.

We see that Karnad is exceptionally strong on the subject of women and sexuality. Aparna Bhargawa Dharwadker while interviewing Karnad asked him if the act of deliberately ignoring the clues make Rani an amoral character. In response, Karnad said that 'I think we are all amoral to some extent, at least at some point in our life' (Karnad, "New Theatre" 359). He then shared his personal life by saying that when he was nearly fifteen it was revealed to him that both his parents had been married before. His mother had been widowed when she was only nineteen. In the 1940s, Brahmin widows were made to shave off their heads and were confined to the kitchen. But Karnad's mother was a brave woman who took a bold step and became a nurse. There she met Karnad's father (a doctor) who had an ailing wife. Karnad's parents later got married but

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their first marriage was kept a secret from Karnad and his siblings till they were in their teens. The purpose behind hiding this truth was middle class propriety. Karnad says that ‘this late revelation made me aware that my mother was human, had human desires’ (Karnad, “New Theatre” 359). It is, therefore, as a result of Karnad’s personal history that his women characters appear as humans who desire sexual fulfilment and struggle to attain it.

Appanna, literally meaning ‘any man’ (Karnad, “Naga-Mandala” iii) mistreats his wife Rani and stays with his concubine in the night time. He represents the ego of an Indian husband which makes him neglect his wife. But a Naga becomes an archetype for an Indian man. This dual personality of a husband is emphasised in *Naga-Mandala* through disguise or dual personality as a masking strategy. Rani thinks that Naga, disguised as Appanna, is her reformed husband. Every night, Naga comes and fulfils her desires and yearnings. In the morning, Appanna comes back for meals and as usual mistreats Rani. Whenever she mildly questions and enquires about his coming in the night for love, the disguised husband, Naga, mutes her with his honeycomb of love. It is her daytime husband who drags her to the Village Elders whereas her Naga lover finds a way to protect her from her cruel society. He asks her to go through the snake ordeal knowing that he will be able to help her in attaining a respectable position in Indian society. Karnad links the archetypal and the real through the character of Appanna in *Naga-Mandala*. Through disguise Karnad gives voice to otherwise silenced truths.

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