

Review Article

“Cobra Lifts Its Hood” [¹]: The Human Mind and the Primordial in Karnad’s *Naga-Mandala*

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Abstract: Girish Karnad’s *Naga-Mandala* creates a dream-reality as a playwright in search of a story comes across the life and dreams of Rani, an adolescent girl who gets wedded off to a man whose has no love for her. Her life gets its fulfilment as a Naga falls in her love and becomes one with her as Karnad explores the tradition of folklore whereby Cobras could take the human form and become humans. Through a powerful set of actions Rani becomes a wife and mother and matures into becoming a complete woman. The paper studies the journey of Rani from a young girl to woman through the participation of three males, her husband, the lover and Kappanna, another young man who plays a functional role in working out her liberty. These three males form one self as they evolve and grow into one image becoming facets of one male visage, the three-tier structure of Freud’s mind or consciousness.

Keywords: Mind, Primordial, Folklore, Aminism, Supernatural.

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INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad the veteran Indian playwright, tries to connect between life and the earth through his plays. The processes of human psyche, the human existence are marked by human’s proximity with nature and the earth. The earthen as humans are, their existence is often given a deep nudge by the primordial. Often humans prove shallow in their understanding and their lives lose the depth of sensation which is however present in nature.

As in his play *Yayati*, so too in *Hayavadana*, *Fire and the Rain* or in *Naga-Mandala*, everywhere is a dire attempt to study man’s basic instincts and to trace a connection between the human mind and the primordial. The character of Naga in *Naga-Mandala*, often associated with the fascination of the human mind, is also an emblem of the earth, the coils of the snake is symbolic of rumination and the unending journey of life. This is given a greater perfection through the use of folklore which is made even more subtle in the incorporation of drama as a form that is highly challenging for it requires the playwright to hold the attention. As Om Prakash Budholia, the critic on Karnad writes in *Girish Karnad: History and Folklore*:

With the aesthetic imperatives the application to the folkloristic cognizance adds to the text the universal signs which are easily traceable, not through the written scroll but through the oral signifiers...

Drama as the expressive form is best suited to unveil the aesthetics of relationships and at the same time it becomes the best vehicle for the semantics of orality. (57)

Girish Karnad in his article “Performance, Meaning and the Materials of Modern Indian Theatre” published in the *New Theatre Quarterly*, emphasizes the importance of folklore in returning to the roots.

The play *Naga-Mandala* has frame narrative of a playwright who is on his life search for a story, which A. K. Ramanujan in his article titled, “Towards a counter-system: women’s tales,” names “A Story and a Song” and the embedded narrative has the core of Rani’s story which he names as “The Serpent Lover”. The story begins and the story is of a young girl Rani who gets wedded to a man, Appanna who doesn’t love her and instead beats her up. The simple story of several girls from different corners of Indian villages takes a turn as a

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snake comes to her rescue, a Naga, who gives up the slithering form of a reptile to stand up erect as a human form, steeped in desire and in an urgency of love. The Naga takes the resemblance of Rani's husband Appanna (which reads as any man). Kappanna, another youth of the village, is the "dark one" who first tells his mother Kurudavva, the blind aged lady about Rani's presence in the locked room. This in a way propels the action and invites the snake into Rani's room in a frenzy of love as Kurudavva administers a potion to Rani to incite love in her husband, which unknowingly falls upon the snake. The paper intrudes into the movement of these three characters who surround the actions that take place in Rani's life. The paper reveals the intricate connection between these three characters, Appanna, Naga and Kappanna, where they emerge as different principles of the human psyche and the different features of the same mind, woven in a dream-like imaginative texture.

The Naga or the serpent has numerous connotations when it comes to human psyche. Often judged as the sensual, charged sexually, potent in reproducing and an intricate element of nature, the Naga has often been perceived as a mythical creature who changes forms and dances and becomes human, temporarily discarding its animal existence. Connecting between both the worlds, the snakes though reptiles without limbs or the complex functions of the higher animals, often replace humans and vie with them for love and consummation. In their burning desire and reaching out to their mates in love, in their urgency the snakes grow and are manifested as humans. This intricate connection between the human world and the world of snakes gets repeated in human imagination and is widely scripted in the myths and folklores; in fairy tales and stories. The world of immense possibilities transcends the strict parameters of life and journey into the unseen sphere of interaction between humans and nature of which the snakes form an intricate part. The Naga tries to connect between the human world and instincts of love in animals or lesser creatures which bring them close to human existence. As humans lose their humane feelings, the animals come in to fill the void.

The characters in *Naga-Mandala* are divided into two sets. The play begins with a frame narrative, where the *Story*, is given the form of a character with a beautiful saree on, which has been transformed into a song. They had left the house of an old woman who had possessed the story and the song within her, but had never revealed them to the world, being unjust to the story and the song, who ultimately take their revenge upon her in their own way. The story and the song enter a desolate temple where burnt out flames used to come and gather, creating space for newer happenings and newer stories. The stories step into a new world of storytelling, where stories and songs come together and create a world all their own.

In this place arrives a playwright, a creative artist in search of a story, whose advent gives the setting a form, the stories, an audience and the oral form of stories a promise of a written stature. The stories in the process lose their nebulous airy stature and enter into a domain that would be all restricted and controlled by the storyteller. However the coming together of the story and the story-teller is obvious, for one stands awaiting the other.

The Naga becomes a powerful symbol of man's deepest feelings, a sense of desire, the urge to unite and come together. Here an element of nature the snake comes to the rescue of the adolescent girl Rani. Appanna instead shares his life and showers his love on another woman, named as the "concubine" in the text. Rani the protagonist, laments and languishes in the absence of her parents but never finds satiety in the company of her husband. Rani in her deepest angst dreams of animals and trees, the world of nature coming to her aid, who would listen to her tears and empathize, would ultimately release her of her sorrows. The husband stands as a ravager, but the Nature works out her release with its inmates of whom the Naga is the predominant.

The Naga in an all-human world is nothing but a mere prey in the hands of men. But in his transformation from the reptile to a big statured man who becomes not only Rani's husband but her child's father is the revenge that nature takes on man. Appanna laments when he finds out that in spite of having not slept with his wife, his wife is pregnant and nature has still blessed her as a chaste woman. He wonders, whether his sins have made him such a sinful creature, that even what is natural, that is the birth of a child in the union of two humans, a man and woman gets convoluted in this case. As the significant critic V. Rangan in his paper titled "Myth and Romance in *Nagamandala* or their Subversion" states—

All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural... (199).

The characters in *Naga-Mandala* overlap one another, and as Appanna, Kappanna and Naga stand before us we realize almost the three-tier structure of the mind as revealed in Freud's hypothesis as the three characters. The characters resemble the reality principle, Appanna; the morality principle in Kappanna as he provides vision to his blind mother and designates the right path; and Naga, the pleasure principle, who is all desire and a genial current of the soul which connects every living to an urge for continuance through interaction with the other. The other in humans and animals, serpent and the marginalized in man can come together and reciprocate in love and desire.

The three characters form the entire of a self, a human mind and in the end we realize that Rani, the slip of a girl gets the realization of her desires and motherhood, through the intervention of these three characters into her life. While Appanna marries Rani, and brings her from her parents' place it is Kappanna who is made to peep into her room to find out whether she had at all attained the status of a wife, is happy and satisfied or is yet to attain the succour of life through this marriage. Under such a condition Rani meets her saviour Kurudavva, only after her son Kappanna tells his mother of her status. While Kappanna meets Kurudavva to form a complete vision amidst night's darkness and the blank vision of blind Kurudavva.

The Naga merely completes the cycle by responding with his senses, by becoming exactly as Rani's heart desires. Naga's emotions reciprocate with Rani's urges and what emerges is pure bliss. The magical effect of conjugality unfurls in full bloom as both the hearts come together. Naga simply reciprocates Rani's feelings, and Naga is no human, not with frailties, but only love and feelings of purity for Rani which seem idyllic.

The ideal is sought and found but such perfection can only be possible in dream-reality. But we are reminded that it is a story and what ensues is a series of narratives that are not grounded in reality, but merely images, the ideal synchronically arranged. The three characters though different in their presences make mirror images of each other as they are of the same age and while Kappanna is Kurudavva's son, Appanna is almost a son to Kurudavva. The Naga on the other hand exactly resembles Appanna, though holding a shadowy form and entity.

The characters in their perception reach out to the mind and feelings of love of Rani and everything around Rani becomes exactly of her mind through a series of developments in the incidents of her life. The images pile around her. Though initially Rani is wedded to Appanna, her husband shows no concern for her. Instead at Kurudavva's behest Kappanna peeps into Rani's room and becomes the first to know of Rani's plight who passes on the message to his mother Kurudavva and thus begins the story of Rani's impasse from her straightened situation. Naga with his exuberance of love and enchantment for the girl takes up the charge of making her happy and the baton is taken up by Appanna in the end who decides to serve Rani without further questioning her chastity.

The child is born and Naga recedes to its slithering self while Rani gets the status of a chaste woman endowed upon her by the Naga in the form of the cobra who blessed her before the villagers. Naga shrinks and Appanna grows. The child born out of Rani and Naga's union and born out of love brewed from the potion handed to Rani by Kurudavva had been brought

in by Kappanna. The share of the three men in letting Rani's motherhood happen is one of the striking resonances created in the play.

In the end three endings leave enough scope for accommodating both Appanna and Naga. The second ending in which the Naga dies is replaced with the ending in which the Naga exists as an intricate part of Rani's existence, her hair. Naga remains in Rani's child, but more so he lives in her satiated desires, her fulfilment, womanhood and motherhood. If Rani's existence is fixed on her husband Appanna, the journey in which she started her life as a wife, a woman, rather than a girl, began with the Naga and his love for her. This in turn began with the revealing of the dark secret of her life to Kurudavva by her in the presence of the latter's son.

Naga and Kappanna belong both to the world of darkness. While Naga's existence is burrowed within the earth, Kappanna's life is covered by the pall of darkness of his mother's existence. However they are endowed with a strange vision to see the world and enlighten the lives of the others. Naga is aroused with love for the adolescent girl Rani, and he takes up the form of a man, her husband and thereby begins the strange love affair between the two. At this juncture there comes the intruder, the husband Appanna and sets the dog and mongoose upon the Naga. The Naga is pursued and though he survives he loses his love as Appanna returns as the devoted husband and surrenders before Rani. However Rani by the end of the tale gives the realization that she had been aware of the two different existences behind the same countenance.

Kappanna has the vision of the world, but his vision is interpreted by his mother. His unbiased vision actually saves Rani and Rani is absolved of her terrible plight only after Kurudavva becomes aware that Rani has not attained the love of her husband. Kappanna rushes home and brings in the magical potion. He also gets seen by Appanna. By the end of the play this man who acts as the functional part of the story is wiped off from the scenario and we are told that his story is certainly a different story. However when we look into the depths of his existence we undoubtedly feel that we as readers are not aware of his existence and the course of his life. Still he functions and functions incessantly until he is wiped off from the scene.

In the end Kurudavva is unhinged and merely calls upon Kappanna, the dark one. She has no concern with the world and merely concentrates upon the loss of her child. She has lost her vision through Kappanna, but her inner vision tells her that he might be in the grip of the Yaksha woman, whose desire has drawn him out from his premises to an unknown world.

Kappanna is lost and the Naga relegates to the background, an excess in Rani's life. Both these characters the Naga and Kappanna, enter into the

recesses of life, seeping through the interstices of this world making myth and miracle possible. Love and lovelessness, fancy and imagination, hope and hopelessness and life beyond this world becomes possible only through the presence of the dark creatures slithering beneath the world of firm, big creatures making moves and exploiting the world and its darkneses.

The Naga slithers into the room through the bathroom drain but becomes a human as he enters into Rani's ambience. Though he still appears as a snake in the mirror, when it comes to Rani's vision, the snake is nothing but her husband, but steeped in love for her, devotion and a feeling of surrender, unrecognised in men in a patriarchal society. Patriarchy has made the man a fractured individual with more than one self. Men failed to represent themselves as humans, rather they would appear more like the aldermen of the society. As Jyoti Sahi in her book titled *The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols* rightly observes, "Girish Karnad's art can be described as a vision of reality" (123).

The men have turned ravagers under the aegis of patriarchy and far from being *soul-meet* to their partners, they have proved themselves failing in their love, care and support. Moreover the men too have been deprived of their stability and the sanctity of their mind. The different selves have come up who are not complementary, rather warring selves contesting with each other for their primacy and authority over each other. The selves fight, clash and ruin each other, and as Naga perishes and Kappanna vanishes, Appanna gets the sway over his life and the prime role in the life of Rani. However as Appanna fails to be the complete human and trails behind, the Naga obviously appears. What comes out is a series of incidents and at least two endings through which the Naga remains in the lives of Rani and her child.

The characters again and again repeat themselves, whether in their similar appearances or in their attitudes. Appanna brings disgrace upon Rani but is rectified by the Naga. Through the presence of the snake the human attains her dignity and even her life, for it is the snake which prevents her from facing humiliation before the village elders. As Vinay Dharwadker in the book titled *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan* cunningly observes, "...it is her very infidelity that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife" (Dharwadker 444).

The repetitive characters stand back-to-back forming a complete self away from the fractured entities. What comes out is a series of opposites—dark and fair within the same individual (Kappanna, which means dark, while he is actually fair), vision and blindness, day and night, snake and mongoose, love and no-love, the weak and strong (Appanna), the Naga's poison to kill

(the dog and the mongoose), his blessing Rani before the villagers, the birth (of the child) and death (of the Naga) and so on.

The three characters, Appanna, Naga and Kappanna as if in a dream get displaced from their single entity of one self who is Rani's husband possessing the qualities of the Naga and embracing the darkness of Kappanna and featuring them in the three different characters. They are actually traits of the same personality who had been conceived in Rani's dreams.

"I am convinced I am seeing something with these eyes of mine, only to wake up and find I was dreaming..." (Naga-Mandala 1)

Karnad's obsession with a tripartite structure as the lives of Rani, before her wedding and after her trial, clearly forms a three-tier. The love triangle in Naga-Mandala bears a characteristic similarity with Yayati in Yayati's relationship with the two women in his life. In *Hayavadana*, too Padmini's relationship with Devdutt and Kapila forms a similar triangle and so too Parvasu-Yavakri and Vishaka in *The Fire and the Rain*. The three different endings of Naga-Mandala too bear a similar tripartite structure. The human Appanna, the serpent (animal) Naga and the suddenly vanishing into nowhere as an extra-terrestrial being, form the three states of existence— human-animal and a beyond-human existence. All these divided existences get together and get piled up on the same frame.

The identities of the three characters merge at times and dissociate at others. While the Naga is active during the night, Appanna can be seen during the day and not at night. Kappanna comes to look at Rani to find out if there had been anybody in the room only to find that Rani was inside at the behest of Kurudavva. However Kappanna vanishes and Naga subsides as Appanna takes charge of Rani and holds the centre-stage. All these characters as if grow out of Rani's dream of escape, of movement beyond the tortures of her new-found life. The characteristics of dream as condensation and displacement can both be clearly evinced in the growth and development of the three characters— Appanna, Kappanna and Naga. The three characters as if in a dream vision are merged together and displaced at different levels. These three characters are in away the different strata of the mind. The dream episodes of Rani's life take the stature of reality just Rani confesses— "...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" (Karnad *Naga-Mandala* 32) just as the Naga too aspires to become real— "I thought I could become human. Turn into my own creation" (Karnad *Naga-Mandala* 42)

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