

Contemporary Literature

Prof. Aysha Viswamohan

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

IIT Madras

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Good afternoon, we will continue with Girish Karnad's Nagamandala, Play with a Cobra. And key words for this lecture, folk tradition as we were just seeing that Karnad employs the use of prologue. Prologue is setting the tone of a play and how does it set the tone? Using the prologue, employing dance, music and prologue if you remember, we started with a man, a playwright, an unnamed man on the stage who has been cursed with death. And the only condition is that he has to spend one night during the entire month and he has to remain awake during that night. But for some reason, the man fails to do so. He is consumed by sleep every night and tonight is the last night of that month and if he fails to stay awake tonight, then his death is almost certain.

Now in order to stay awake, he needs to, he needs some help and then comes the story. And this is another as we were looking at the aspect of meta-theater where there is the playwright is commenting on his own craft. Because he has put numerous audience to sleep along the years because of his theater, therefore he is cursed with that accumulated mass of sleep and therefore he is attacked. And he in order to stay awake, he needs the story's help.

The story goes on to tell this story of Rani and Apanna, what happens. So, and also look at the other elements of folk tradition, employment of dance and music. We have man sitting on the stage, we have musicians coming from the isles and they play their instruments. So, all these folk traditions are very well employed. The story is a blend of two Kannada folk tales.

The first one is the story of a story teller who is cursed to stay awake. He is cursed, you know he is suffering because he has put too many people to sleep because of his boring stories and therefore he is fated to sleep every night and the only way out is to stay awake one entire night. So, that is one folk tale, another is that of a snake lover, a snake, the king cobra who can take the human form. This is also a very popular mythical tales from our folk traditions. So, this is the background.

Now, Kapanna, the blind woman, sorry Kurudavva, the blind lady has given a magical route to Rani to feed her husband. So, the idea is that if he takes that, that paste in any form, then he will fall in love with his wife. He is not, he has a mistress right now and he is very inattentive to his wife, but Kurudavva is certain that once Rani succeeds in feeding him that paste, he, you know the tables would turn and then what happens next. So, this time the idea is that Rani should be feeding her husband the bigger piece. Rani says that little piece made him sick.

This one Kurudavva, it will do good, believe me. I am telling you from my own experience, go in, start grinding it, make a tasty curry, place 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. So, you know the husband will be your slave. So, he would be so ensnared by you. Remember, do not let anything frighten you.

Rani goes into the kitchen. Kurudavva wakes up Kapanna. They exit. It gets brighter. Apanna comes.

He has a vicious looking dog on a chain with him. He brings it to the front yard and ties it to a tree stump there, then comes to the front door and unlocks it. The dog begins to bark. Surprised at the bark, Rani peers out of the window. That blind woman and her son, let them step here again and they will know.

Rani to this story, shall I pour it in? Rani having a conversation with the story, who if you remember is still sitting on the stage along with the playwright. So, another very technique. This is again used to create an estrangement effect between the audience and the actors between the happenings on the stage. Rani says, yes, continuing the narration. So, Rani prayed silently to the gods and poured the paste into the curry.

There was an explosion. Since, it is a magic root, the curry turned red, blood red, stream pink and furious enveloped Rani. Rani mimes the entire action. Upanna calmly continues his bath. It is evident he has heard nothing.

Rani, oh my god, what horrible mess is this? Blood, perhaps poison, shall I serve him this? That woman is blind, but he is not. How could he possibly not see this boiling blood, this poisonous red? And then, even if he does not see it, how do I know it is not dangerous? Suppose something happens to my husband, what will my fate be? That little piece made him ill. Who knows? Oh my god, this is evil. I was about to commit a crime. She brings the pot out, avoids the husband in the bathroom, steps out of the house, starts pouring out the curry, stops.

No, it is leaving a red stain. He is bound to notice this. Right here on the doorstep, what shall I do? Where can I pour it? Story, Rani put it in that ant hill and if you remember the beginning of the story, we are told that there is an ant hill right across the street, right opposite the house. The ant hill, she runs to the tall ant hill, starts pouring the liquid into it. The dog starts howling in the front yard.

Rani, see what is bothering the dog. Surprised at receiving no reply, Rani, he goes to the kitchen drying himself. She is not there, comes to the front door looking for her. By this time, Rani has poured the curry into the ant hill and is running back to the house. The moment she turns her back to the ant hill, a king cobra lifts its hood, his out of the ant hill, looks around.

It sees Rani and follows her at a distance. By the time she has reached the front door of her house, it is behind a nearby tree watching her. Rani comes to the front door and freezes. Aparna is waiting for her. Rani, where have you been? Moves aside, so she can go in, but the moment she steps in, Aparna slaps her hard.

Rani collapses to the floor. He does not look at her again, just pulls the door shut, locks it from outside and goes away. There is not a trace of anger in anything he does, just cold contempt. The dog barks loudly at the king cobra which watches from behind the tree, hissing excited, restless.

Aparna goes away. Rani goes to her bedroom, throws herself down in her usual corner crying. It gets dark. The king cobra is still watching from under the tree. The dog continues to bark. When it is totally dark, the cobra moves towards the house.

The barking becomes louder, more continuous. Rani wakes up, goes to the window, curses and shouts, goes back to bed. The cobra enters the house through the drain in the bathroom. Story, as you know, a cobra can assume any form it likes. That night, it entered the house through the bathroom drain and took the shape of and then, you know, because the cobra and not Rani's husband Aparna, he has taken the milk.

So, what happens? Under the influence of that magic potion, he falls in love with Rani. He takes a human form. The cobra takes the shape of Aparna. To distinguish this Aparna from the real one, we shall call him Naga, meaning a cobra. So, that is how the play gets its name Naga Mandala.

That is a story of cobra. Naga searches for Rani in the house, finds her sleeping in the bedroom, watches her and begins her act two. So, now, you look how well he combines two stories, two folk tales. This is the framework. The man who has been cursed to

death and a snake lover. So, at the beginning, this is the story that provides us the framework and this is the major story which raises certain important issues.

Act two, Rani sleeping and Naga is watching her from a distance exactly as at the end of act one. He moves nearer her and then, gently caresses her. She wakes up with a start. Now, she sees a new side to her husband. She does not know that this is in fact the cobra.

Do not get up. But when did you come? Shall I serve the food? At midnight, then something else. She does not know what to say, stands dazed, leaning against the wall. Why do not you sit? Are you so afraid of me? I will go and sit there away from you. Will you at least sit then? He moves away, sits on the floor at a distance from her and he sits on the edge of the bed, long silence. She is dozing with struggles to keep her eyes open.

A tender bird like you should get such a rotten husband. So, she sees a totally different side of her husband. Now, of course, who is not her husband? I did not say anything.

You did not. I am saying it. Did it hurt the beating this morning? You walked up in the house all day. You must be missing your parents. Rani struggles to hold back a sob. They doted on you, did not they? She suddenly bursts out into a fit of weeping. I know you want to see your parents, do not you? All right, I will arrange that.

She looks at him dumbfounded. Truly, now smile just a bit. Look, I will send you to them only if you smile now. She 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 had a good night's sleep, but Naga happy to see her react, but what? But you brought the dog here only this morning.

There was no problem all these days. See, this is the first clue that this person actually is not her husband, but Rani is too innocent. You know she has been petted and fawned on by her parents earlier and she has grown up in a very protective environment listening to fairy tales and stories of wicked monsters and beautiful princesses locked up in castles by demons and all. So, she would not take the hint although this is a clear hint that this person may not actually be her husband, but she is too innocent to realize that. Naga trying to cover up. Yes, of course, till this morning once the housework was over, what was there to do? I used to sleep through the day and lie awake at night.

Today, this wretched dog has been barking away since it was brought here. That is why I was dozing when you came in. I am sorry.

Quite right. That would not do anymore. From tomorrow, I want you to be fresh and bright when I come home at night. At night because he usually does not come at night. Yes, I shall come home every night from now on. May I sit by you now or will that make you jump out of your skin again? Rani jumps.

Now, do not be silly. I am not a mongoose or a hawk. These are the two animals that cobras are usually scared of. They are the traditional enemies of a cobra and therefore, this animal imagery. I am not a mongoose or a hawk that you should be so afraid of me.

Tell me about your parents. What did all of you talk about? Did the pamper you tell me everything? What beautiful long hair like dark black snake princesses. He lays her down gently, gets up, goes to the bathroom, turns into his original self and slithers away. Morning, Rani wakes up and looks around. No husband comes to the front door, pushes it.

It is still locked, baffled. She washes her face, goes to the kitchen and starts cooking. The dog starts barking. Apanna comes, pats the dog. He unlocks the door and steps in.

At the noise of the door, Rani comes out running. She is laughing, but when did you go away? I am in the freezes when she sees the expression of distaste on his face because this is Apanna of course, and who has no interest in Rani. Yes or nothing. Good. Goes to the bathroom.

Rani stares after him, then returns to the kitchen. I must have been dreaming again. That is how she convinces herself. It grows dark night. Rani lies in the bed wide awake, a long silence. The cobra comes out of the antyl and enters the darkened front yard of her house.

The dog suddenly begins to bark. The sounds of the dog growling and fighting mixed with the hiss of a 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 is 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 stairs, 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, closes her eyes tight. Naga, what nonsense is this? Without opening her eyes, Rani bites her forefinger, gives a cry of pain. What is going on, Rani?

Rani, I must be going mad. Why? She talks to herself. His visit last night, I assumed I must have dreamt that.

I am certainly not dreaming now, which means I am going mad. Spending the whole day by myself is rotting my brain. Naga, it is not a dream. I am not a figment of your imagination either.

I am here. I am sitting in front of you. Touch me. Come on. Well, then talk to me. All right, then I had better leave. Then I had better leave. Now, please do not. What is the point of sitting silent like a stone image? What do you want me to say? Now, she is come entirely baffled by his behavior, obviously unable to fathom what is going on.

For her, it is her husband who behaves strangely during day. His behavior gets more restrained at night and she is unable to recognize the truth. You talk so nicely at night, but during the day, I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a snake. Naga laughs.

It is all very well for you to laugh. I feel like crying. What should I do then? ~~Up~~ Coming at night or during the day? Who am I to tell you that? It is your house, your pleasure. Now, let us say the husband decides on the day visits and the wife decides on the night visits. So, I would not come at night if you do not want me to. Rani, why do you tease me like this? I am sick of being alone and then tonight, I was terrified you might not come that what I remembered from last night may be just a dream. I was desperate that you should come again tonight, but what am I to say if you spin riddles like this? Naga, I am afraid that is how it is going to be like that during the day like this at night.

Do not ask me why? I would not. Now, also if you look at it from a feminist point of view, what is a woman supposed to expected to do traditionally? She has to obey. She has to remain unquestioning and she has to remain silent and then see what happens. Come on, you slept like a child in my arms last night.

You must be sleepy now. Come, go to sleep. Rani moves into his arms suddenly stops, but what is this? She touches his cheek. Blood on your cheeks and your shoulders that looks like tooth marks. Did you run into a thorn bush or a barbed wire fence on your way here and do not worry about that. Wait, let me apply that ointment mother gave me.

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 would not see his reflection. She looks at him in the mirror, screams in fright. He moves with a lightning speed.

What is it? He gently shuts the mirror box and pushes it away. Rani turns and looks at where he had been sitting. When I looked in the mirror, I saw there where you were sitting instead of you, I saw a what a cobra. Do not mention it. This say that if you mention it by name at night, it comes into the house. This is another traditionally held belief that cobra who is strong enough to assume a human form, who has the powers to assume a human form.

He can take any shape, any form, but still if you view its image, it will reveal its true self. That is a traditional belief is again repeated here. All right, suppose a cobra does come into this house. Do not, why are you tempting fate by calling that unmentionable thing by its name? Why should not it come with love? May God bless our house and spare us that calamity.

The very thought makes misheade. She obviously, she being a very orthodox person, she also does not want any cobra, but fate will sit otherwise. She has a snake in that too in her home and that too as a lover. I am here now, nothing more to fear. Oh no, what am I to do with myself? In all this, I forgot to put the ointment on your wounds.

Your blood is so cold. It is the way you wander about day and night, heedless of wind and rain. What is it now? Once I looked into the mirror, I seem to be incapable of thinking of anything else. Father says, if a bird so much as looks at a cobra there, now you said cobra, now he is bound to come.

I let it. I do not feel afraid anymore with you beside me. Father says the cobra simply hooks the bird's eyes with its own sight. The bird stares and stares unable to move its eyes. It does not feel any fear either. It stands fascinated watching the changing colors in the eyes of the cobra.

It just stares, its wings half open as though it was sculpted in the sun lights. That is the power of a cobra. That is the magnetism of a cobra that he can hold a bird hypnotized. You can see the simile here. The snake lover and Rania is of course the bird. You have several repeated images of Rani as a bird, bird in a cage, now bird locked, you know, locking eyes with a cobra.

Then the snake strikes and swallows the bird. So, again, it is swallowing the bird. So, almost like consuming the bird. That is the reference here.

She kisses her. They freeze. The flames surround them and sing the song of the flames. Rani gets up and goes and sits in a corner hiding her face behind her knees, her arms

wrapped around her legs. Listen Rani, I shall come home every day twice at night and of course, again at midday. At night, wait for me here in this room. When I come and go at night, do not go out of this room.

Do not look out of the window, whatever the reason and do not ask me why. Again the same idea that you should not be questioning. Just accept things the way they are. That is what her parents expect her to do. That is what her husband expects her to do and the same is true of Naga as well.

No, I would not. She is gradually becoming bolder. So, look at what she says. The pig, the whale, the eagle, none of them ask why. So, I would not either, but they ask for it again. So, I can too. Can't I? 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 dock surprised. She feels it and makes sure it is dead. Feels the lock on the door, calls out in a whisper.

Kappanna, a dog and it is dead. It was not here the night before and the lock is still there. I wonder what the silly girl has gone and done. Look inside the house. Can you see anything? No, listen.

They listen Naga walks toward the bathroom. Footsteps, it is a man. It is inside. He will be out any minute. He cannot. What about the door? What about the lock? And if Appanna locked the door from the outside, who is in there now? Look, look, see who it is. Reluctantly, he goes to the backyard. Naga goes to the bathroom, turns into a king cobra and goes out of the drain just as Kappanna arrives at the spot and sees the cobra emerge.

Kappanna, a cobra rushes to the front door, picks up Kurudavva and starts to run. Where? In the backyard out of the bathroom drain. Then why are you running? It is not following us, is it? It should be gone by now.

Let me down. Rani hears the commotion, comes running to the front door. Who is it? Kurudavva. What is it? Who was that shouting? I will, I will speak from here. Kappanna says he saw a cobra there. Where? Coming out of your bathroom drain.

Oh my God, I hope he did not go to the bathroom. Rushes to the bathroom calling out to Appanna. Who do you mean? Appanna? Yes, she is relieved to find the bathroom empty, comes back to the front door. He is not there.

I told you he left just a few minutes ago. We have been there. We have been here the last half hour. No one has come out. He certainly is not in the house. There the door is locked from the outside.

It would not be if he was in here, would it? Perhaps you did not see him come out. May be so. Well, my child, have you started your married life? Rani blushing. Yes, Kurudavva. So, you see the power of my root. Did not I tell your husband, tell you your husband will cling to you once he tastes it? Rani amber is tries to laugh.

Well, my work is done. I will be off now. Bless you. Burn incense in a ladle and stick it into the drain. Keeps the reptiles out. So, this is again extremely ironical. The house has been blessed. Rani is finally, you know, a regular proper wife to someone.

But at the same time, burn incense is so that, you know, reptiles can be kept away. This is extremely ironical because this is the same reptile who has turned Rani into a wife. Rani, please come again. Kapanna. If the steps we heard were apanna's, well, he certainly has not come out of the house.

Kurudavva, of course, he is in there. As couples start playing games, they begin to invent some pretty strange ones. Come on, let us go. They move Rani thinks for a while, goes into the bedroom. Kapanna, carrying Kurudavva, suddenly stiffens, stands frozen, staring at something in the distance.

What is it, Kapanna? Kurudavva asks. You would not believe me if I tell you, it was her again. 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.

Perhaps, she is an ogress of demon birth or someone from the nether world, perhaps. A spirit, why do not you just say who it is? You would not let me. When you talk like this, I feel we are falling apart.

It is a fear I have never felt before. They exit arguing. It gets brighter. It is midday. Apanna enters. She is the dead dog. Now, this story of Kurudavva and Kapanna, what could be the significance of this story in the middle of the cobra story and Rani and cobra? The idea is that according to Karnad, that there are several stories. There are several folk tales going around.

Right now, our concern is Rani and her husband. You know that triangle of Rani, her

husband Apanna and the cobra. Kurudavva and Kapanna too have a story, but that story is not the center of this present story. We are not concerned with that. What we are concerned with is Rani's story. So, that is of course, more significant than anything else, but at the same time, there are several stories going around and Kapanna's story is for a different time, you know for another day, but right now, we are concerned only with Rani's story and that is the significance of it.

What is wrong with this dog? Why is it asleep in the hot sun? It is dead. Something has bitten it perhaps that cobra from that anthill.

This was no ordinary hound. It cornered a cheetah once. It must have sensed the cobra. It must have given a fight. Did not you hear anything at night? She shakes her head. He gets up. Apanna exits. Rani stares after him nonplussed, touches herself on her cheek.

Last night, he had blood on his cheeks and shoulders and now, she sees no sign of blood or any wounds on him. Goes to the kitchen and starts cooking. Apanna comes.

She serves him food. He gets up, locks the door and goes away. While all this is going on, the story narrates the following. The death of the dog infuriated Apanna. The next day brought a mongoose.

A mongoose is deadlier than a dog. It can fight more forcefully, fight a cobra more forcefully. It can give it a tougher fight. Therefore, a mongoose lasted only one day, but it has evidently given a tougher fight. Its mouth was full of blood.

There were bits of flesh under its claws. Nails of snake skin were found in its teeth. Rani fainted when she saw the dead mongoose. That night, he did not visit her, her nagalava because obviously, he was too badly wounded. There was no sign of him the next fifteen days. Rani spent her nights crying, wailing, pining for him. When he started coming 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 lamp in the house. As she does so, some of the flames get into position. Rani talks to the flames now. Wait now. Do not be impatient. It would not belong. It will open out, reach out with its fragrance.

She rushes into her bedroom, waits tensely, suddenly jumps, breathes in deeply. There it

is, the smell of the blossoming night queen. How it fills the house before he comes? How it welcomes him? God, how he takes me, sets each fiber in me on fire. So, you can see the kind of myths that Karnad employs here. So, you have definitely the, you know, a reworking of perhaps the fairy tale of beauty and the beast because that is what beauty does to the beast. It transforms the beast into a loving and caring person.

Of course, you have the myth of the cobra who can take any human shape, any human form and who can stand for his love. Cobra also has a very strong image as a sexual being. All those, all those myths are reworked into this tale. Vani, all these days I was never sure I did not just dream up these nightly visits of yours. You do not know how I have suffered. When I saw your scowling face in the mornings, I would be certain everything was a fantasy and always want, almost want to cry, but my real anxiety began as the evening approached.

I would merely lie here, my eyes shut tight. What is there to see after all? After all the same walls, the same roof as the afternoon passed, my whole being got focused in my ears. The bells of cattle returning home, that means, it is late afternoon.

The cacophony of birds in a faraway tree, it is sunset. The chorus of crickets is spreading from one grove to another. It is night. Now, he will come. Suppose he does not tonight.

Suppose the night queen bush does not blossom. Suppose it is all a dream. Every night the same anxiety, the same whole feeling deep within me. Thank God, that is all passed now. What she is narrating? She is narrating, you know, she has really blossomed into a woman and she desires and she pines for this cobra who she does not know that he is not actually her husband, but what is important is that there has been an awakening in her. Finally, from a silent and unquestioning and obedient person, she has turned into someone who is coming into her own and Naga wants to know why, why does not she doubt him anymore, his existence anymore.

I have definite evidence to prove I was not fantasizing. I am pregnant. He stares at her dumbfounded. It does not make you happy. What am I going to do with you? Laugh, cry, bang my head against the wall. I can never guess how you will react. I thought you would dance with joy on hearing the news.

Actually, I was also afraid you might not do anything of that sort. That is why I hid the news from you all these months. I cannot make any sense of you even when it is just the two of us.

Now, a third life joins us. I did not 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 proud. You are not proud that I am going to be a mother. Sometimes, you are so cold blooded. You cannot be human. Naga, of course, you know, is not terribly excited about this news. He knows the repercussions. He knows what all this could lead to.

Also, look at the reworking of the Kunti myth from the Mahabharata who got pregnant almost supernaturally. So, again, we have the same idea repeated here. Karnad, of course, is very fond of using tales from our epics, both Ramayana and Mahabharata. His first play, Yayati, was also a reworking of a Mahabharata tale. So, again, the same myth is found again, is repeated here. And like Kunti, Rani too is forced to keep her pregnancy a secret because she may not be aware of, but of course, it is not socially acceptable.

She did not get pregnant by her own husband. What are you talking about? I have already told you. How can it be a secret again? How long can it remain a secret? Another 15 days, 3 weeks.

Naga, I realize it cannot remain a secret for long. That is why I said as long as possible. Please do as I tell you.

Yes, I shall. Do not ask questions. Do as I tell you. Do not ask questions. Do as I tell you. No, I would not 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.

Do not ask questions. Do as I tell you. 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 nor a cat or a sparrow. Why do not you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? When 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.

Do not ask questions. Do as I say. She turns away. Naga takes a step to go. They both freeze. The lights change sharply from night to midday. In a flash, Naga becomes Apanna, pushes her to the floor and kicks her. Now, the truth is revealed to her husband Apanna and of course, he cannot believe because after all, there has been no relationship between Apanna and Rani.

So, he knows that that is not his child. Aren't you ashamed to admit it? You hurl it. I logged you in and yet you managed to find a lover. Tell me who it is. I swear to you, I have not done anything wrong.

You shame me in front of the whole village. You darken my face. He beats her. The cobra watches this through a window and moves about frantic. Apanna, I swear to you. I am not my father's son. If I do not abort that child, I will smash it into dust right now.

He drags her into the street, picks up a huge stone to throw on her. The cobra moves forward, hissing loudly, drawing attention to itself. Rani screams. Apanna throws the stone at the cobra, which instantly withdraws.

Rani uses this moment to run into the house and locks herself in. Open the door. I will show you. I will go to the village elders. If they do not throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Apanna.

Rani cries on the floor. Naga comes and sits glumly nearby. Rani, the village elders will sit in judgment. You will be summoned. That cannot be avoided. Listen to me carefully. When you face the elders, tell them you will prove your innocence. Say, you will undertake the snake ordeal. Now, this is another reworking of a very well established folk tale. Taking the snake ordeal, you know, it is like putting one's hand inside a snake's pit and if the person is speaking the truth, the snake would not bite and but if he is lying, he would get bitten to death and that is the idea, but of course, it is very risky.

It depends on plenty of chances. Snake ordeal, what is that? There is an enormous ant hill under the banyan tree, almost like a mountain. A king cobra lives in it.

Say, you will put your hand into the ant hill and pull out the king cobra and take your oath by that cobra. I cannot. There is no other way. Yes, there is. Give me poison instead. Kill me right here.

At least, I will be spared the humiliation. Would not the cobra bite me the moment I touch it? No, it would not bite. Only you must tell the truth. What truth? The truth. Tell me the truth while you are holding the cobra. What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his knights 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? I cannot help it, Rani.

That is the way how it has always been. That is how it will always be. All will be well,

Rani. Do not worry. Your husband will become your slave tomorrow. You will get all you have ever wanted.

As she talks, Naga moves down the steps, turns into a snake and goes away. She suddenly turns to him. He is not there. In commotion, crowds of villagers fill the stage from all sides. The three elders come and take their positions near the ant hill. The stage becomes the village square. Dear child, we have done our best, but you refuse to listen to us. We have no alternative now, but to give in to your demands. It brings no credit to the village to have a husband publicly question his wife's chastity, but Aparna here says, since the day of our wedding, I have not once touched my wife and yet she is pregnant.

He has registered the complaint. So, we must judge its merits. The traditional test in our village court has been to take the oath while holding a red hot iron in the hand, but you insist on swearing by the king cobra. The village court has turned into a country fair because people from far and wide are coming to see this snake ordeal.

Rani steps up to the ant hill. The crowd surge forward. The cobra rears its head out of the ant hill. The crowd steps back in terror. Even Rani is scared and runs back.

The cobra waits, swaying its hood. Rani steps farther and farther back. Go on, child. Do not delay now. Then she goes to the ant hill, plunges her hand into it and pulls the cobra out.

Rani says and she takes her oath now. Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand only two. Aparna is triumphant. There she admits it. Two, she says. Two, who are they? Rani, my husband and this cobra. 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. So, now, you see, she takes the ordeal and suddenly those words come pouring out. She has not planned it. She is too innocent and naive to plan that such a thing, but what she says is indeed the truth. That is, after coming to this village, she has not been touched by anyone except two. One her own husband and second the king

cobra and that is actually the truth and therefore, the snake does not bite her and she is saved. So, we will continue with this tomorrow. Thank you. .