

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
Professor Dr. Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Nagamandala Part – 1

Length: 36:27

Hello and welcome to this discussion on Girish Karnad's Nagamandala. I would like to begin this session by offering a few of Karnad's thoughts on this folklore based play. Karnad says Nagamandala is based on two folktales. One is by A.K. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women. Probably the older women in the family, while the children are being fed in the evening in the kitchen or being put to bed. It's a very interesting introduction to the context of the play. It's that this story, the story of Nagamandala is based on two related oral tales that he heard from AK Ramanujan and he says that these tales were told by older women to children, when they are being fed in the evenings or when they are being put to bed.

I want us to keep this idea in mind. Essentially what he is trying to say here is that it is children literature, literature for children. So, stories told by older women to entertain the kids so that they can eat food, children would eat or go to sleep. So, I want you to really hold on to this concept that these are stories for children told by women.

Karnad goes on to say that '...the other adults present on these occasions are also women therefore these tales, though directed at the children,' he is repeating that idea '...often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.' So, even though the stories are told to children, there are other women as the audience. So it is, it is a different domain. It is a different domain in which children and women participate. So, to go back to the earlier point- so, if this is children's literature, I want us to use that concept and analyze some of the plots of this particular play.

So, let's come to the list of characters, list of characters and the order of appearance is listed as, the man, the flames, the story. The man, the flames destroy, followed by Rani which means 'Queen', Appanna which means 'any man', Kurduvva which means 'the blind one', Kappanna which means 'the dark one', Naga which means 'the Cobra'. Then we have three village elders, crowds.

Appanna and Naga played by the same actor. The names are allegorical, they're stereotypes, there are essentialisms. Rani stands for any woman who is sort of a queen to the parents.

Appanna is any man, Kurduvva means any blind woman. Blindness could be literal as well as metaphorical. Kappanna any dark one. And Naga, representative of the Cobra.

So, what is interesting is that we do not have any proper names, we all have common names listed out here. The village elders also don't have any particular proper name, right, they serve a particular function, they have a particular purpose in this society and we have the crowd, the mass of people who serve as the audience. So that is interesting.

So, if we think about the earlier points made by Karnad about the fact that these are stories told to children by women, somehow if you kind of even only look at the character list, we understand that the women are telling them universal stories in a way, stories of essentialism, about a man and woman and village elders and crowds. So this is a story for all times in a way, there is no specificity in a way. These are universal stories perhaps, with a question mark at the end perhaps. So I want you to think about that universalism and what are the problematics underlying universalisms? Essentialism, folklore, what is folklore? Folklore, are oral tales, oral narratives passed on from one generation to the other handed down.

In fact, there is a quotation about that from Ramanujan which I talked about in one of the introductory sessions, where he says that folklore is just kind of a kitchen away, a grandmother away, a suburban away. So they are very close to us, even when we live in big cities such as you know Chennai, Calcutta, and Bombay. Folklore and the stories, all stories all narratives are closer to us than we think.

So, if that is the case, that is the case that they are so close to us, and they are time immemorial, what function do they serve? What is the message that they convey? What is the ideology, culture, function behind these stories? Let's talk about this idea further in this play.

So I want to come to the prologue. We have a setting here, let me read the setting. 'The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken, so the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified.' Broken temple, no identifiable deity. What do they symbolize? That is one question that I want you to find an answer to. Cannot be identified. 'It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the cracks in the roof and the walls. A man is sitting in the temple. Long silence, suddenly he opens his eyes wide, closes them, then uses his fingers to pry open his eyelids then he goes back to his original morose stance. He yawns involuntarily, then reacts to the yawn by shaking his head violently and turns to the audience.'

There is a slight humor in the fact that he is trying to keep his eyelids open physically. And he starts his monologue.

He says, '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. A mendicant told me you must keep awake at least one whole night this month, if you can do that you will live, if not, you will die on the last night of the month. I laughed out aloud when I heard him. I thought nothing would be easier than spending a night awake. 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, for tonight is the last night of the month, even of my life perhaps. For how do I know sleep would not creep on me again, and as it has every night so far. I may doze off right in front of you and that will be the end of me. I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fright. And he said 'you've written plays, you've staged them, you have caused so many good people who came trusting you to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs. That all that abuse, massive sleep has turned against you and become the curse of death. I hadn't realized my place had that much impact. Tonight, maybe the last, tonight may be my last night. So, I've fled from home and come to this temple, nameless and empty. For years I have been lording it over my family as a writer, I could not bring myself to die a writer's death in front of them. 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 storytelling or playacting. Voices here at this time of night-lights, who could be coming here now?'

I will stop there. The last lines, 'I abjure all storytelling or playacting,' by the way is a reference to or an evocation of Dr. Faustus Marlowe's very famous Renaissance play. Like he says, I abjure all magic or black magic, God saved me, so it is, it is kind of evoking it in a kind of funny manner here. If I survive, I will not write any more plays.

So, this man, as we can see, is a playwright. And what is the problem here? The problem is that he has been cursed. The idea of curse. Some power outside of this domain of human beings that is kind of punishing him because he has written rotten plays and abused the faith of the audience.

So I want us to remember that idea of curses. What is the other interesting idea that's kind of present even in this prologue? Mendicant, a wandering, not quite a beggar, but a saint-like

figure, someone who has some kind of sacred aura about him, and who has some kind of power over the fates. So this mendicant curses the playwright for writing bad plays. I want you to remember this figure of the mendicant, because this figure comes up again, in one of the subplots of this play Nagamandala. They have another subplot apart from the plot of Rani and Appanna and Rani and Naga. We have another subplot, which talks about Kurduvvaa, the blind one, the blind one and her son called Kappanna the black one, the dark one.

So, what is the story of Kurduvva? Kurduvva was born blind, Kurduvva was born blind,, therefore, we can clearly understand that mulch would have been terribly difficult for her. So, what does she do? One fine day a mendicant passes by her house and she really takes care of that mendicant. Serves him good food, treats him really well, honors him , and the mendicant is so impressed, is so happy and so pleased. So what does he do? He gives her three pieces of root. He says that whenever somebody that you are interested in comes by your house. Whenever you want to marry somebody and what you can do is, you can grind this root, a piece of root, and give it to that person, that man and that's it. He would be enslaved by the power of your beauty and he will marry you.

And she does that, she is quite successful. She uses the medium sized root, she grinds it and gives it to someone, mixes it in the food and gives it to that person and that person in a flash marries her and she has a child, the dark one. She is quite satisfied.

So we can see the power of mendicants here. That is the point I am trying to convey here. Mendicants have influence in people's lives, they change the course of their lives. So we have a mendicant who is cursing this man and saying that if you stay awake for the entire month, then you can - stay awake at least a day in a month, you will escape death. And he is trying to keep himself awake in this empty temple and things happen. Who comes in? Can I have someone read the dialogue of the flames and it's a very-very interesting set of ideas. What I will do is I will start this off, and then a few of you can come and continue the section about the flames.

So, the 'voices at this time of the night?' the man asks 'Light, who would be coming here now? He hides behind the pillar. Several flames enter the temple giggling, talking to each other in female voices-' please note the flames indicate female identity. So, if you go back to the characters in the order of appearance, we have the man, please mark that man as a playwright. The male playwright, the flames as female voices. I want you to note that, female voices

giggling. Usually young females, young females giggle not the older ones, we do not associate giggling with really older women. Young, perhaps unmarried or newly married, kind of character is associated with giggling.

Talking to each other in female voices. Man, 'I don't believe they are naked lamp flames! No wicks, no lamps, no one holding them, just lamp flames on their own floating in the air. Is that even possible?' It is a brilliant theatrical moment to have, naked flames floating in. This is height of magic I would say.

One of the powers of Karnad's theatre is in exploiting the world of myths and folklore for theatrical effect and I want you to think about the meaning behind the charm. There is charm we agree. There is magic. There is brilliant play of light and darkness. But what is the purpose, what do they convey? Is it spectacle? Is it plain spectacle? Or is there a reason behind that spectacle? I want you to think about that, I want you to probe that use of technical brilliance. No wicks, no lamps, no one holding them, magic there, just lamps on their own floating in the air, is that even possible?

'Another 3 or 4 flames enter talking among themselves. Flame 3 addressing flame 1, which is already in the temple. "Hello, what a pleasant surprise you are here before us tonight." And flame 1 says "The master of our house you know what a skinflint he is, he is convinced his wife has a hole in her palm, so he buys all the groceries himself. This evening before the dark was even an hour old they ran out of Kusubi oil. The tin of peanut oil did not go far. The ball of castor oil was empty anyway, so they had to retire to bed early and I was permitted to come here." There is laughter.

There is a lot going on in that one paragraph. The male is the master of the house. He is very stingy. And what is the impact of his stinginess? He doesn't let the wife go out of the house, he does the shopping himself. So for all practical purposes, the wife is locked indoors that is the subtext to that kind of worldview that we get through that narrative of flame 1. And further implications, if you want to kind of read between the lines, they had to retire to bed early and I was permitted to come here. Laughter. Why are they laughing, something is going on in bed? So, all that is there. So, the wife who stays indoors has perhaps this only function to perform at this point of time. So, the flame, the story of the flames are very, very interesting anecdotes by themselves.

‘Flame 2, sneering,: “Kusubi oil, peanut oil, how disgusting. My family comes from the coast. We do not touch anything but coconut oil.” Then flame 1 says, “But at least I come here every night, what about your friend the kerosene flame, she hasn’t been seen here for months, she is one of the first tonight. Actually, flame 4, that is flame 4 “Actually from today on, I do not think I will have any difficulty getting out early.” They all laugh.

Again you know it is laughter that comes from knowledge, similar to the laughter of the first after the first flame’s narrative, there is laughter there is laughter here. And then they ask why, what happened? The other flames giggle, giggling again that female tendency attribute to giggle at perhaps superficial things maybe.

The rest of the flames “Tell her, tell her!” “My master had an old ailing mother. Her stomach was bloated, her back covered with bed sores, the house stank of cough and phlegm, passing urine no one got a wink of sleep at night. Naturally, I stayed back till the old lady died this morning, leaving behind my master and his young wife, young and juicy as a tender cucumber. I was chased out fast.” Giggles.’ Giggles. Again, the stuff that was slightly suggested in the narrative of the first flame of flame yeah, so the first flame is kind of really spelled out in very suggestive words here, isn't it.?

‘Leaving behind my master and his young wife, young and juicy as a tender cucumber, I was chased out fast.’ So, you can clearly see the theme coming to the fore in these anecdotes of the flames, it is sexuality, plain and simple, it’s simmering on the surface.

And what do you make of that description of the old woman who is sickly? My reading of this is this. You have two, we have two extremes on the spectrum. One a sickly ailing, very very physically repulsive female identity on the one hand, and a very attractive female identity on the other. So, these are the two extremes that are on offer and the function of a female depends, the attractiveness of a female depends on how attractive she is for the male.

So, this is, you know, old sickly stuff that is quickly discarded to move on to the current saleable figure. So that kind of duality, black and white, very crude division of perspectives is what we have here. ‘Flame 3, “You are lucky, my master's eyes have to feast on his wife limb by limb if the rest of him is to react. So we lamps have to bear witness to what is better left in the dark.” So it gets worse and worse, right? The narrative of sexuality, the function of the female for the male's pleasure is kind of described in really very stark detail here.

‘They all talk animatedly, new flames come and join them. They group and regroup chattering. Man to the audience, “I had heard that when lamps are put out in the village, the flames gather in some remote place and spend the night together gossiping. So this is where they gather.” A new flame enters and is enthusiastically greeted.’ I will, I will stop my reading here, I will let you continue and then we’ll talk more.

Student: ‘Flame: You know, I have only an old couple in my house. Tonight the old woman finished eating, swept and cleaned the floor, put away the pots and pans and went to the room in which her husband was sleeping. And what should she see, but a young woman dressed in a rich new sari, step out of the room. The moment the young woman saw my mistress she ran out of the house and disappeared into the night. The old woman woke her husband up and questioned him, but he said he knew nothing, which started the rumpus.

Flames: But who was that young woman? How did she get into the get into your house?

New flame: Let me explain. My mistress, the old woman knows a story and a song, but all these years she has kept them to herself and never told the story nor sung the song. So the story and the song were being choked in prison inside her. This afternoon, the old woman took a usual nap after lunch and started snoring. The moment her mouth opened, the story and the song jumped out and hid in the attic. At night when the old man had gone to sleep, the story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari. The young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out just as the old lady was coming in. The story and the song created a feud in the family and they revenged on the old woman.

Flame 1: So if you try to gag up one story another happens.

Flames altogether: But what are they now, the poor things? How long will they run around in the dark? What will happen to them?

New flame: I saw them on the way here and told them to follow me, They should be here any moment, there they are, the story with the song.’

Student 2: ‘This story in the form of a woman dressed in a new colorful sari enters, acknowledges the enthusiastic welcome from the flames with the languid wave of hand and goes and sits in a corner looking most despondent. The flames gather around her.

New flame: Come on, why are you so despondent? We are here and are free the whole night. We listen to you.

Story: Thank you, my dears, it is kind of you. But what is the point of you listening to a story? You can't pass it on.

Flames: That is true. What can we do? Wish we could help.

While the flames make sympathetic noises, the man jumps out from behind the pillar and grabs the story by her wrist.

Man: I'll listen to you.

The flames flee helter-skelter in terror. The story struggles to free herself.

Story: Who are you? Let me go.

Man: What does it matter who I am? I'll listen to you, isn't that enough? I promise you, I'll listen all night.

The Story stops struggling. There is a new interest in her voice.

Story: You will?

Man: Yes.

Story: Good, then let me go. (Man does not). I need my hands to act out the parts. (He lets her go). There is a condition however.

Man: What?

Story: You cannot just listen to the story and leave it at that. You must tell it again to someone else.

Man: That I certainly shall if I leave, but first I must be alive to. That reminds me, I have a condition too.

Story: Yes?

Man: I must not doze off during the tale, if I do I die, all your telling will be wasted.

Story: As a self-respecting story, that is the least I can promise man.

Man: All right then, start. (Suddenly) But no-no it is not possible, I take my I take back my word. I cannot repeat the story.

Story: And why not?

Man: I had just now taken a vow not to have anything to do with themes, plots or acting if I leave. I do not want to risk any more curses from the audience.

Story (gets up): Good bye then you must be going.

Man: Wait, do not go please. (Thinks) I suppose I had no choice. So now, you know why this plays being done, I have no choice, bear with me please. As you can see, it's a matter of life and death for me. (Calls out) Musicians, please! (Musicians enter and occupy their mat, the Story and the song. Throughout the rest of the play, the man and the Story remain on stage. The flames too, listen attentively though from a distance.) Go on.'

Professor: I want us to look briefly at the idea that is there on the slide. It is Karnad on Nagamandala. He says that the tales,' the tales that are there in this play, the stories that are there in this play also express a distinctly woman's understanding of the reality around her, a lived counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions.' In other words, he says that, these stories are from the point of view of women. All along we have looked at the point of view from men through classical texts and through structures such as patriarchy, now we have the women narrating their experiences, the lived reality, right. So we can understand that the stories of these flames are women's stories of their lives. But what are these stories about? They are about the male enjoying or exploiting the bodies of women. That is the story.

Now, if you come to this new story told by the new flames, it is very interesting. This complication in the domesticity of an old woman and her husband. We have an old woman, witnessing, seeing a young woman in her husband's bedroom and she gets annoyed, she gets angry. There is this idea that 'the moment the young woman saw my mistress, she ran out of the house and disappeared into the night. The old woman woke her husband up and questioned him, but he said he knew nothing, that started the rumpus.' The scare was there, there is a lot

of hub-bub. And who exactly is this young woman? So, more imaginative stories come through the pen of Karnad. That woman is nothing else but the story and the song.

So where do they come from? From the mistress herself, right? The mistress, the old woman knows a story and the song, but she has not been passing on that story. Stories are meant to be told, folklores are meant to be passed on, so the old woman is not doing her job. She should have passed on the story and the song, but all these years she has kept them to herself never told the story. So she is not doing the job and the story and the song want to take revenge on the old woman. Therefore, what did they do? They create trouble in domestic heaven.

The old woman is kind of avenged by the story and the song, because this story and song transforms herself into a young woman and is present in the bedroom of this her husband. So, ‘...the story and the song are being choked, imprisoned inside her. This afternoon the old woman took her usual nap after lunch and started snoring. The moment her mouth opened, the story and the song jumped out’ literally from the body of the old woman, right? They waft out from the open mouth and take the shape of a young woman. The young woman at night when the old woman had, old man had gone to sleep, the story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari. The song became a sari.

It is a very interesting description, Story became a woman, Song became sari. So, stories are female in identity? Stories are young females, attractive females, females that can cause trouble in domestic heaven. So, even the song becomes an object of clothing, an outfit part of woman’s clothing. So, stories and songs are gendered, stories and songs are gendered. Playwright is a male, we need to remember, playwright is a male, stories are female.

So, I want to think back to this question, why doesn’t the old woman pass on the story? Why does not the old woman pass on the story? If she refuses to pass on, folklore stops. But what are these folklores about within the compass of this particular story? Folklores are about sexuality. So, if the older woman does not pass on this story, she is refusing to pass on the narratives of sexuality. The narratives of how women exploit young wives and discard old women, perhaps, according to the story world of Nagamandala. There are exceptions of course, I will come to that in a while, but this is the general tone and theme. So, when the old woman refuses to tell the story, she is refusing to pass on cultural knowledge, cultural information, cultural identities, which are associated with young women.

For that, the folklore is avenging, taking revenge on the old woman, they are causing trouble. What kind of trouble? Domestic trouble. So we need to understand the complexities of this particular world order. And in that regard, if you come to the second section of the prologue, the story, which is going to tell the story of Nagamandala, tells the man that you have to pass this on. That is the condition. You have to tell the story to others, you have to keep passing it on. So what kind of stories are they? What kind of moral legitimacy to these stories have? Especially in relation to gender, especially in relation to the identity and cultural function of women?

We have Karnad himself, Karnad himself telling the readers that these stories are from the point of view of women against or expressing patriarchal structures. So, these stories are kind of giving us the everyday details of a patriarchal-run world. And these stories must go on. There is a kind of paradox in this kind of idea.

So I want us to look at another point about Karnad: the status of a tale. Karnad says ‘...the status of a tale becomes akin to that of a daughter, the status of a tale becomes akin to that of daughter. For traditionally a daughter too is not meant to be kept at home too long, but has to be passed on. This identity adds poignant in ironic undertones to the relationship of the teller to the tales.’

This poignancy, this tragedy, this sadness, these ideas have a disturbing aspect to them. So Karnad can see the parallel between stories and daughters both have to be passed on from one family to the other, from one old woman to a young woman and from that young woman to a child, and that female child to another, and so on, stories are like daughters.

These stories are problematic too by Karnad’s, by Karnad’s point of view too. These stories are problematic, these stories tell, the hard tales, the hard realities of women in a patriarchal world. So how, why should these stories go on? That question needs to be asked, that question is inevitable. So when the old woman is refusing to tell the story, is she deliberately putting a stop to this kind of cycle, the cycle of oppression? Is the old woman deliberately doing that and for that is she being revenged, by story and song? So, I want you to kind of read the plays really, really closely.

On the one hand, this is folklore, we have got this from generations past, these are stories, which we cannot really kind of question the logic of., These are stories of magic and myth and gods. These stories cannot be really questioned because they are beyond logic. But at the same time, according to Karnad these stories tell the tales of women in a male-dominated social

order. If these stories tell both real practical realities then how do we square these two? What is the relationship between these two? These questions need to be asked.