

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Nagamandala Part - 2
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I'll briefly summarize the first frame that we have. We have the prologue, isn't it? We have a playwright who is all by himself in an empty temple, there is no deity there, there is no image, that in itself is symbolic. There is no superior spiritual power somehow directing this whole schemata in some ways. It could be one way to look at the absence of the deity.

So, we have a playwright who is apparently cursed and he has to spend the night awake, so that he can be alive for the rest of his life. And he witnesses some flames, which talk amongst themselves and the content of the talk is, can be loosely framed as gossip, gossip associated with the feminine domain and predominantly linked to sexual affairs. Predominantly. And we have a new entrant called a Story, a female identity called story, who sets up a narrative in which we meet with Rani and Appanna and Naga. So you can see how we have a set of interlinked stories. One story being kind of linked to another, and that is being linked to another, and so on and so forth.

Now, we kind of talked about the significance of an old lady, not telling tales, which is why she is being punished by the presence of a young woman in her husband's bedroom. And we talked about the importance of that silence. Because we also talked about how problematic these stories are. Problematic in the content in relation to the female gender. So we were kind of discussing as to the righteousness of such stories being passed on from one generation to another.

And we also saw how Karnad describes these stories as children's literature, stories told for children by women in which other women were an audience. So, even though they were told to children in order to make them eat or go to sleep, there were other women who were the audience for these kind of tales. So, there was a kind of an indirect communication going on and exchange going on between one set of women and another. So that is the general theme, which we covered in the previous session.

‘A young girl,’ Story says this, ‘A young girl her name, it does not matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the

long tresses. For when her hair was tied up in a knot it was as though a black King Cobra lay coiled on the nape of her neck, coil upon glistening coil. When it hung loose, the traces flowed, a torrent of black along her young limbs and got entangled in her silver anklets. Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead. Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon her husband came and took her with him to his village. His name was, well any common name will do, Appanna? Appanna.’ And then Appanna enters. What is the significance of this opening section of act one? I want us to look at a relevant comment by Karnad in relation to his other work Hayavadana.

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Names and Identity



- (This is why characters in Hayavadana have no real names.

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He says in relation to his work Hayavadana, ‘...this is why characters in Hayavadana have no real names. The heroine is called Padmini after one of the six types into which Vatsyayana classified all women. Her husband is Devadatta, a formal mode of addressing a stranger. His friend is Kapila, simply ‘the dark one’.’

There is a kind of a structural parallel between that comment, which talks about names and this excerpt in act one of Nagamandala. Any name will do, and the man says Appanna, and then the story goes with that name. And Rani means Queen, the apple of her parents’ eyes. So, these two figures, as well as the Naga, which comes later in the story are types, archetypes, essential ideas, essential concepts. So, it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter what they are named, which is slightly problematic if the story and its ideology is problematic. Because what is being hinted at here is the notion that this is a universal tale, springing from the landscape. So, if it’s a universal tale, then I wonder whether we should pass it on, from mother to child, from child to

another, and so on and so forth, because this is a deeply problematic, disturbing tale in the sense that it very, very viscerally captures the gender imbalance in society. So, what this play, I believe, is doing is showcasing a particular set of axes of power in society without offering a grand solution. Karnad doesn't go that far, Karnad doesn't go that far, though he does show you in great and painful detail, the lived reality for women of a particular period in India. I will leave that concept for now, we will revisit it as we discussed the play further. So, any common name will do. And I want to connect this idea to another point in Indian theatre, let us let us find that.

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Western vs Indian theatre



- “Western theatre has developed a contrast between the face and the mask—the real inner person and the exterior one presents, or wishes to present, to the world outside. But in traditional Indian theatre, the mask is only the face ‘writ large’; since a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype, the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature.” (13)



This is Karnad again, he says ‘Western theatre has developed a contrast between the face and the mask, the real inner person and the exterior one presents, or wishes to present to the world outside. But in traditional Indian theatre, the mask is only the face writ large; since a character represents not a complex psychological entity, but an ethical archetype, the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature.’

This is the theory and we have the theory put into practice in that except from Nagamandala that I just read, and also in relation to Hayavadana. Karnad in other words says that Western theatre makes a distinction between the mask and the inner psyche. There's something ulterior in the mind, which is being hidden by the mask. This is his hypothesis, which I want to unpack. And he says that that is not the case with Indian theatre, what's out there is what's in there, right? We are not hiding anything, we are just exaggerating the inner psyche in great detail in the mask.

So, each person in the theatre according to Karnad represents a particular moral type, or a characteristic or an attribute or a tendency. Rani stands for perhaps all women, all Indian women; Appanna perhaps stands for all Indian males, if we put this theory into practice. Very simply and very roughly. So, this distinction is something that we need to keep in mind because Karnad works with this philosophy for much of his cannon, and especially in Nagamandala and Hayavadana and all his mythological works.

Okay act one, what happens in Act one? I am going to read related sections from Act One. So, Krudavva and her son Kappanna come to the house of Rani to figure out what is going on. And Krudavva realizes that she has been locked inside the house.

‘Krudavva to Rani: I am coming child, right now. Do not go away. (To Kappanna) He keeps his wife locked up like a caged bird. I must talk to her. Let me down instantly. You go home if you like.’

So, Krudawa as we understand very clearly is blind who is carried about on the shoulders of her son, who is called Kappanna. And they are at the window, the barred window of Rani and Appanna’s house. The idea of her incarceration is pretty clearly visually communicated to us in that clip.

What else is evident in that scene? The women talk through the bars. Conversation is not happening freely. They are physically restricted one way or another. That is kind of communicated there if you read that visual image a bit more closely, you’ll know that. All conversations between Rani and Krudavva happen through bars, so that is, that is a very interesting concept. Perhaps we may not be able to visualize it when we are reading this play, but when you see it enacted, or when you see it adapted for the screen, you realize that part pretty quickly.

So, she has her own story to tell, which I told you in the previous session. You remember that subplot about Krudavva, how she was not able to get married and then one fine day a mendicant gives her a root and it works. The man who eats it becomes head-over-heels in love with her and marries her instantly. And what she does, as you can see, in that scene, she offers the pieces of root, which she has left over with her, to Rani. She promises her that this will work, so she gives her that small piece of root that she has and says, mix it in with the food and give it to your husband and it will work. And she says, maybe I’ll read that part-

She says, 'Here, take this smaller piece that should do for a pretty jasmine like you. Take it, grind it into a nice paste and feed it to your husband and watch the results. Once he smells you he won't go sniffing after that bitch, he will make you a wife instantly.'

The language of Krudavva is pretty visceral. It's vulgar. And the point there is to find the solution to the fact that the husband is not doing his husbandly duties, especially in relation to the marital bed. And I want you to go back to the direction that Krudawa gives to Appanna in terms of finding that piece of root which she has kept securely. That's very interesting to look at.

'Listen son, run home now, go into the cattle shed. The left corner,' The left corner, Krudavva says, '...just above where you keep the plough behind the pillar on the shelf.' Krudavva says behind the pillar on the shelf, Kappanna repeats it behind the pillar on the shelf, 'there is an old tin trunk, take it down, it is full of odds and ends but take out the bundle of cloth, untie it inside there is a wooden box.' A wooden box all right, 'In the right hand side of the wooden box is a coconut shell wrapped in a piece of paper. Inside are two pieces of a root bring them.' Look at the way it has been secured in layer after layer of protection. And if you see that clip from the movie, I don't think I have it here with me. But if you see the movie he keeps on unpacking, you know covers after covers, and he gets to the piece of root.

What is the significance of that? There are two related ideas, two related ideas, one is that Krudavva faced the same problem more or less, to the one that Rani faces right now in the present, both are unable to fulfil their sexual life. Krudawa is unable to find a husband, Rani gets a husband, but she is not able to consummate the marriage. Two similar issues, right? Two similar issues.

And then, the problem in the present can be solved by going backwards in time to the past, to the past of Krudavva. And, you know, and so on, you can perhaps even go back further in time. The idea here is that women's problems more or less fall within this particular domain, which can all be solved through similar solutions. Grind the root, paste, turn it into a paste, put it in food, give it to the husband, and all will be well, right?

So, Krudavva's past and Rani's present are not drastically different. The details may be, the details may be, but similar solutions are being offered by Krudawa to Rani and she messes up. She messes up. The first time around the drug doesn't work. I have that scene here with me, if you want we can see it. We realize that the solution doesn't work the first time around, right?

And what response does Krudavva have for this failure, the first attempt, what does she say? Let's look at that one, that's pretty interesting. Same act one. So, Krudavva is back and she quizzes Rani. She asks, '...did you feed him the root? Yes. And what happened? Nothing, he felt giddy, fainted, then got up and left.' That part is exaggerated here in the movie adaptation.

So, it's exaggeration, so that the audience will kind of perceive in detail as to what is the, you know, point of that root. So '....that's bad this is no ordinary infatuation then.' Krudavva says 'This is no ordinary infatuation then, that concubine of his is obviously-

Who?

I did not want to tell you. There is a woman, a bazaar woman, she has your husband in her clutches. Squeezes him dry. Maybe she has cast a spell.'

Maybe she has cast a spell. That's what is interesting to me there. So, the spell laid by the concubine, the mistress of Appanna is more powerful than the small piece of root that Krudavva offers. So there is a kind of a battle between several kinds of potions and roots and spells different kinds of magic are at work. And she says okay this is a much bigger thing than we had initially thought of and she says, 'There's only one solution to this.

What?

Krudavva (giving her the bigger piece): Feed him this larger piece of root, feed him this larger piece of root.

'No,' says Rani

'Yes. That little piece made him sick this one it will do good, believe me this is not hearsay I am telling you from my own experience. Go and start grinding it make a tasty curry mixed the paste in it, let him taste a spoonful. He will be your slave. And then just say the word and he will carry you to my house himself.'

We don't see that scene at all in this play Nagamandala, we don't see a scene in which Krudavva and Rani meet up like neighbours and friends and have simple ordinary conversation that scene is not given here. It's not offered to us by Karnad.

In terms of feminine identity we have two big extremes in this play. One is the kind of feminine identity projected by Rani. Very young, inviting, physically. At least that is what Naga tells us and Krudavva says, only the husband is not able to kind of appreciate it. So, that very inviting

sexually very attractive image is one kind of identity that we have. The other is the older woman, women in their old age, sickly old age. If you go back to the anecdotes offered by the flames in the prologue, we have references to such old women. Very sickly women, who demand attention, who demand to be taken care of. And then there is this other old woman who does not tell stories, therefore somehow rebelling. It's a very interesting character, that old woman who does not tell stories. I particularly like her. And then we have figures such as Krudavva.

So, these two extremes are what is offered by Karnad in Nagamandala. There are other types of feminine identities which are missing. That is something to be taken note of. I do not know how to respond to that, I will leave that to you. Rani is told not to be frightened, Rani is given encouragement by Krudavva and she tries to do what has been advised.

And then we have Appanna coming in with a dog. And Appanna has heard about the interventions or you know, he has kind of come to know about the presence of Krudavva and her son and he brings in a dog and he hopes that that dog will keep them at bay. Appanna says 'That blind woman and her son! Let them step here again and they will know. I will bathe and come to eat. Serve my food,' he tells Rani.

When it comes to Appanna he is somehow trying to cleanse himself perhaps with not great success probably. And he says 'I will bathe and come to eat. Serve my food.' (Goes to the bathroom and starts bathing, Rani takes down her pot of curry, removes the lid, takes out the paste of the root.)

Rani (to the story): Shall I pour it in?

It's a very interesting meta-theatrical moment there. Rani asks the story, who is telling the story, shall I pour it in? What does that signify? It signifies the power of the story to direct, to control the lives and actions of its members, of its actors. Story is Prospero-like, Faustus-like in the way he manages, Mephistopheles in some ways, it is a rough comparison that I am drawing.

'Shall I pour it in? (Appanna 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? No, no, 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? No, I must get rid of this before he notices anything.

(She brings the pot out, avoids her husband in the bathroom, steps out of the house, starts pouring out the curry, stops.)

Rani: No, how awful it is leaving a red stain! He is bound to notice it right here on the doorstep. What shall I do? Where can I pour it so he would not see?’

Story says, ‘Rani, put it in in that anthill.’

Look at the direction that is coming from outside of the story. It makes the story very very live. It is happening now. It is, it’s not a story that has already happened, it is happening right now. It’s not myth, it’s not folklore, it is not some grandmother's tale it is it is live action right now happening on the stake. So, that kind of time where it’s also present as well as past, makes it very, very real in terms of its ideology, which is Karnad, which Karnad is trying to kind of lay it bare very viscerally for the audience. Karnad is saying okay, all this that is happening here in Nagamandala is pretty problematic in terms of its gender dimension.

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Karnad on *Naga-Mandala*



- Inevitably, the pattern of relationships she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction. The empty house is locked in could be the family she is married into.



Look at the quote, by Karnad there, he says, ‘...inevitably the pattern of relationships she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction. The empty house is, the empty house is locked in could be the family she is married into.’ The family

becomes the institution of the family becomes a prison in itself, okay that point we can clearly relate to.

The other point is what is interesting to me. He says that the kind of relationships that Rani has, both with Appanna and with Naga is something of a fiction. Because all these encounters are disjointed encounters. There is no coherent linear meaning to those encounters. If it's Appanna of the daylight hours, it's all about food. If it is Naga of the night time, it's all about sex, right? Food and sex, very basic functions are being required of Rani. And he says these encounters are almost fictional, they don't, they don't make sense for the woman who is, who is at the centre of this.

So, this is what he is laying bare in Nagamandala, this is what he is laying bare in Nagamandala. But my question is, how far is Rani rebelling against the various patriarchal structures, how far? What are her moments of rebellion? If the story happens in the past, happens in the past of folklore, if the story happens in the past of Krudavva, if the story happens in Rani's life, if that life is now, how do we assess the moments of rebellion? And what kind of power do these patriarchal structures continue to possess, continue to possess? And how can we still pass them on as oral tales for children?

So, these are some of the ways which you can address. There is no simple answer. It is a complicated medley of narratives that we have. And if you remember the point that I was making through Lyotard in the context of what is the story, *The Hunger for Memory*? The point is not the truth value of stories. The point is the story itself, the fact that it is being circulated in society time and again. We don't have to worry too much about the truth value, we just have to worry about its influence. The amount of influence and intervention it has in everybody's lives.

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Karnad on *Naga-Mandala*



- The basic concern of the Indian theatre in the post-independence period has been to try to define its 'Indianness'.



Interestingly, in the movie, this movie from the 90s interestingly, the husband doesn't buy this, right. He is not convinced by the test, the chastity test that she undergoes by holding the King Cobra. He doesn't believe in the power of nature to impregnate her wife, his wife, Rani.

So, what he does is he watches his house at night and he finds out that it is Naga, who transforms himself in this shape and sleeps with his own wife. He finds that out. And in the end, there is a big fight between the two, Naga and Appanna, and Appanna successfully kills Naga and asserts his patriarchal rights within his domestic domain.

So, metaphorically, figuratively, this 90s movie says no to God, if the gods would sleep with the wife, so patriarchal power is established pretty assertively in this movie, if you read it very closely you will know that.

So let us put the movie aside for a bit and come back to the perspectives that Karnad weaves around this particular play and he says that 'the basic concern of Indian theatre in the post-independence period has been to try to define its Indianness'.

That's one of the basic foundational aspirations of plays written after Indian independence. So, what is Indianness in Nagamandala according to Karnad? That's the question that I want you to find answers to, what is Indianness in Nagamandala? What are its important tenets? Folklore? Folklore and what else? Find out.

The ideas that I'm sharing with you are from Karnad's introduction. So you don't have to go very far to find out the source of all these quotations that I attribute to Karnad. They are in his introduction to the Oxford edition of his three plays.

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Theatre and Individualism



- The door banged by Nora in *The Doll's House* did not merely announce feminist rebellion against social slavery. It summed up what was to be the main theme of Western realistic drama over the next hundred years: a person's need to be seen as an individual, as an entity valuable in itself, independent of family and social circumstance.



The movie referred to in this video is the 1997 Kannada movie Nagamandala. Students can find clips of it by searching for it on Youtube.

This is an interesting quote that he refers to in his introduction. Karnad says that 'The door banged by Nora in the Doll's House', it seems Dolls House, '...did not merely announce feminist rebellion against social slavery. It summed up what was to be the main theme of Western realistic drama over the next 100 years: a person's need to be seen as an individual as an entity valuable in itself, independent of family and social circumstance.'

That's what according to Karnad is embodied, communicated in absence, The Doll's House. The value of an individual, the identity of an individual devoid of family and social

relationships. So it not merely represents feminist rebellion on the part of Nora it represents the assertion of an individual.

And he says that, he goes on to say that ‘...this kind of exploration of the rights and values of the individual doesn’t happen in the Indian theatre’, this is Karnad’s perspective. He says that ‘...even though we have a massive urban population, the basic tenet of bourgeoisie ideology, which is the celebration of the individual, at the expense of all other factors such as family, class is not explored at great depth in Indian theatre.’

So I want us to keep that concept in mind and read Nagamandala against these ideas that Karnad discusses in the introduction. How far does his own play hold up to all these values that he discusses, all these concepts that he probes in his introduction? It’s a very interesting exercise, trust me. I’ll stop here. We’ll continue in the next class.