

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
Professor Dr. Divya A
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Nagamandala Part -3
Length: 22:59

Hello and welcome to the afternoon discussion about the context of folklore in Nagamandala by Girish Karnad. And we are dealing with the course in Modern Indian Literature in Translation. So today we will be specifically talking about how folklore is creating a backbone, or rather how folklore is being contextualized in the narratives of Nagamandala, and a few of Girish Karnad's plays, which are actively influenced by the perspectives of folklore.

So in this context, I would like to talk specifically on what were the reasons why Girish Karnad was mostly influenced by the idea of folklore. So since his childhood in Karnataka, and he has spent a lot of time in the regional place of Sirsi, and in his own interviews, which is widely found across the internet and other networks, you will find that he has always spoken about the particular dramatic art form called Yakshagana.

In Yakshagana, he is always talking about how the dramatic representations as well as the presentations of Yakshagana has influenced him in course of time in course of his childhood that helped him develop his dramatic perceptions, and has in future helped him to understand how to create a proper dramatic narrative with the help of or with the characteristics of folklore infused in that.

So, I will speak a little bit on Yakshagana first, because it is one of the bedrocks on which the plays like Nagamandala and Hayavadana stand. So, Yakshagana is a traditional Indian theatre form developed in Dakshin Kannad, Udipi, Uttara Kannad, Shimoga and in the western parts of Chikmagalur districts in the state of Karnataka and in the Kasaragod district in Kerala that combines dance, music, dialogue, costume, makeup, and stage techniques with a unique style and form. It is believed to have evolved from pre-classical music and theatre, during the period of the Bhakti movement. It is sometimes simply called Aatha.

It is, Yakshagana is strongly influenced by the Vaishnava bhakti movement, this traditionally presented from it is presented from the time of dusk till dawn. Its stories are drawn from the epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and other epics from both Hindu and Jain in the Indian traditions.

So, while we are talking about Yakshagana, we have to also talk about certain features of Yakshagana which are actually instrumental in its expression. For example, the first one is known as the Raaga. So, the Yakshagana Raaga refers to the melodic framework; it is essentially connected to the idea of music. It is based on pre-classical melodic forms that comprise a series of 5 or 4 musical notes upon which a melody is founded. Raagas in Yakshagana are closely associated with a set of melodic forms called Mattoo. In the Yakshagana tradition, raagas are associated with different times of the night throughout which the entire performance of Yakshagana is carried out.

The second one, the first one being raaga, the second one is talking about Taal or tala. So, it is mainly depending on the ideas of rhythms. So, they are determined by the poetry style called Yakshagana Padhya or Padma. So, tala or Taal also decide how a composition is to be enacted by the dancers. It is similar to Taal in other forms of Indian music, but differs from them structurally. Each composition is set to one or more Taal, rendered by the percussion artists who are playing.

Now why I would like to talk about raag and Taal specifically in this context of Nagamandala is that these kind of ideas of Raag and Taal, which are more musical; it will be difficult for us to understand them if we are reading it is, if it is a closet drama, it will be difficult for us to understand that. So what we have to do is that we have to watch the performance of Nagamandala in the proper sense, which you all will be getting to observe in YouTube. There are various groups who have performed Nagamandala. So, I would be suggesting it will be great and very significant also if we can understand the concept of how Yakshagana Raag and Yakshagana Taal becomes so instrumental in conveying the depth or the fundamental characteristics which Nagamandala as a play is trying to represent.

And the third one which is there, after Yakshagana Raag and Taal is the Prasangha and the literature. So, Prasangha is a collection of poems written to form a music drama. It is almost like a music drama. The poems are composed in well-known Kannada meters using a framework of Raags and Taals. So it is, it also has its own meter. The collection of Yakshagana poems forming a musical drama is called a Prasangha as a whole.

So, the oldest surviving Prasangha books are believed to have been composed in the 15th century. As you can know, it is pretty ancient, but many compositions have been lost in time. There is evidence showing that old compositions were in use before the 15th century also. So this art form has a historical basis, it comes down with a lot of tradition and heritage and Girish

Karnad as a prolific writer, not only as a prolific writer, but also has an interest, as an enthusiast of dramatic sensibilities has care and concern, and has thought of how to inculcate them, infuse them, make them a prevalent form of feature while he is writing his dramas.

So, in the context of Nagamandala, you will see that there are a lot of folklore traits which are already in function throughout the entire play. And since Yakshagana was one of the basis of developing the folklore inclination in Karnad, he has taken or rather infused a lot of understanding from the Yakshagana procedures while writing and conceiving the drama Nagamandala.

You will see that there are many areas where you will find that there are explicit folklore elements in the drama. For example, in the very beginning you will see this, the prologue where the flames are coming in even before the act is beginning. The flames are coming in, they are engaged in a conversation with each other, it almost creates a form of a spectacle. In this spectacle we will see that there is an idea where there is an old woman who has a story to pass on. Passing on when I am saying it, it is literally connecting us to the idea of how it is very deeply infused with the idea of oral tradition. So, the old woman has a story to pass on. So, but the old woman is not ready to tell the story. So, the story takes the form of a woman, the story becomes a woman, that means the story embodies a woman. And the song becomes her sari. So, the song and the story is embodied in the form of a woman and her attire. This is. I would not say the term proverb, but this will become a form of a kind of oral tale which has always been passed on through generations and these can be very culture-specific at times.

So, this for me, it may be seeming different or like a proverb, but for a specific regional Kannada reader or an audience, this can come up as a form of a history which they have always heard about and which they are familiar with. So, this is one of the instances where Karnad goes back to folklore, links with it and comes back.

The second one is about the song and the dance. Song and dance, as I have talked about the Yakshagan Taal and the Yakshagan Raaga as well as the Prasangha, song and dance is a very important factor in Karnad's plays. When we see that in the prologue the flames are there who are surrounding and they are engaging in conversation and almost at the end of the prologue, they engage in a kind of a song.

The song and dance becomes a very important feature of Karnad's drama, specifically in Nagamandala at the end of the prologue, there is a very clear depiction of that. Now, I'll go

back to the character of Rani, who is kind of the central character in this entire play. And so, when Rani takes a different step in her life, like one is the post-marriage one and the pre-marriage one, after getting married to Appana she is going through an altogether new crisis which she never would have anticipated about. So, she is frustrated, depressed, she is feeling extremely pressurized and she is very much out of her zone of comfortability in that case. So, when Appanna is kind of subjecting her to a lot of domination and oppression, she is imagining a prince as her saviour. And this idea of imagining a prince will come and save the woman who is in distress, this is a very predominant trope, which has been passed on through generations, through many stories, consciously or unconsciously, not in only one culture specific zone of the country, but in various zones of the country. The manifestations may be different, but the narrative about the prince being someone who is coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress is a very common trope in Indian folklore. And we have always come to the idea of the Prince and the Princesses and where the prince is always being the one who is displaying chivalry and heroism is also represented here through this idea of Prince becoming a saviour of Rani.

The next one I will talk about is where she is trying to sleep or in her half-asleep, half-awaken situation. In the times of a crisis, Rani is often imagining in trance, about an eagle, an eagle. An eagle's dream where she is basically carried by the eagle to the distant land away across the oceans and everything.

So, always you will see that Karnad is bringing the idea of folklore for creating certain fantastical, if not fantastical, certain characters like the prince, the eagle, these kind of characters who are coming in the half-awakened, half-slept state of Rani, and they are becoming a mode of escape, a gateway of escape for Rani from her uncomfortable reality.

So, these kinds of things where Karnad is actually bringing these kinds of characteristics from folklore and infusing it to human conditions while he is trying to represent the role of Rani's character. It is fascinating how folklore is coming into a context of a very contemporary idea of relationship, breach, distrust, uncomfortability, and how it is actually getting mingled in that through a character like Rani. So, how the ancient comes and enters into a gentleman's agreement with the present story in that sense. So, folklore being something which is very archetypal sometimes and very ancient also is helping Karnad construct a narrative in the contemporary times, so that is one of the transcending qualities of folklore I believe.

Then there is another example of the golden stag with, the stag with the golden antlers who is coming to the door and asking Rani to follow and Rani is dissuading from that fact, that I would not like to follow the Golden, stag with the golden antler.

So, there are many, many images which are very fantastical at times, it will be difficult to call them mythical, because in Karnad's works there are apparently many or numerous illusions of mythologies origins and mythological references but at certain times, it would not be wrong if we say that the mythological and the folklore characteristics often overlap. Not every time, but since they overlap often we have a little bit of difficulty in dissecting both of them to exclusive identities. So, I would not say it is more mythological in this case, but I think that the golden antler stag, the eagle, the prince as a savior, it sometimes it can become mythical also, but sometimes it also becomes a part of a huge folklore tradition that is there in the particularly culture-specific region.

And she has also, and she is also comparing the demon Appanna as a demon locking her up in a castle, which is also a very-very predominant trope of folklore literature, of stories which we have heard from our ancestors in times of our childhood as well as in course of our growing up. This is a very very predominant trope of a demon locking up a damsel in a castle showing or portraying the oppression and domination on the female, this is also given a fresh depiction in this context by Karnad.

And this also is looking at since we are also talking about Rani being a modern woman and looking at Nagamandala, the relationship which is unfolding and complicating itself between Appanna and Rani as a more, in a more modern context. I think that folklore is used almost kind of a parallel narrative here in this case in order to show that how the modern context can be juxtaposed or even if not juxtaposed, can be put aside for comparison and contrast with the with the folklorish contents which have always said the story which we are still talking about today, so it more like a comparative study in that sense.

And there is also another one where we come across a big whale, which comes and breaks down the door. So, these are something more, as I said, it is more like fantastical, where they come across the door, and the door is broken and it shows the spirit of Rani which is trying to break her shackles of imprisonment and free or liberate herself.

So, it's very interesting to see the priests, the eagle, the stag, the whale, these kinds of characters, they are all coming with an intention with an unconscious intention of breaking the

imprisonment of Rani, liberating her from the oppression of the demon Appanna in that sense. So these are metaphors, these are kind of references where folklores are becoming a mode of understanding and interpreting the literal portrayal of what Nagamandala is, what the plight of a woman after marriage is, what the plight of a female in the modern context is, comes into application.

So, in that sense, I believe that the use of these kinds of elements are very very profound in that sense, and which is the and the and the more apparent one, which we all know is about the magic roots. So, the magic roots in this context is given by Krudavva to Rani in order to help her get the attention of her husband who is showing complete ignorance to her. Who is actually engaging himself with flirtatious acts with a different woman outside the marriage and he is actually not letting Rani any kind of freedom, to have any kind of freedom, locking her up against her wishes. And the magic roots is given to Rani only in order to help, it is help by Krudawa, so that Rani can get the attention from Appanna and Appanna should be the one who should be who should be falling in love with Rani after these roots are given or presented to him through any kind of food or drink.

And Rani on the other hand drops these magic roots, the potion or the solution of this magic roots into the anthill. And suddenly there comes, which becomes the most, the crux of the story it becomes the Naga or the Cobra becomes the one who is who falls in love with Rani and that is how starts a whole new different understanding of this play where Naga becomes almost the leading character, leading metaphor in the entire play.

And the Naga comes around in the life of Rani in disguise, he plays the role of Appanna and somehow or the other the character of Naga from the anthill and you know that how the idea of Naga the Cobra is so much well connected to our folklores, of regional folklore. So, the Naga becomes a form of new consciousness which comes in the life of Rani almost invalidating the necessity of Appanna himself.

And the presence of Naga becomes the presence of Appanna. But to us readers, we never, ever care about the presence of Appanna because to us he is always somebody who is outside the, the created zone of Rani.

So, Rani and Naga they create a whole new different relationship which is mingled with love affection. There are a lot of power relations which are there in the play where the Naga comes

in and Appanna goes outside the margin. Hence the idea that, and Rani always gets to see the real face of the Naga only when she looks at the mirror.

So, the mirror only displays the reality. This idea that the mirror displays the reality is also a very well-known proverb. So, I think that this Naga significance of a Naga of the king cobra and how it stands is a protector, as a lover, as an antagonist to Appanna, as a loyal soul, who stays till the end with Rani and accepting its death thereby in Rani's locks of hair.

There is nothing fantastical about them, but the fact is that these kinds of ideas, which Karnad has brought in this play, these kinds of ideas, which are infused in this narrative of male-female, the power relations between the male and female, the intermediate- these kind of ideas here he has infused these folkloric elements to bridge the gap between what we know as archetypes, ancient traditions and with what exactly the contemporary scenario of male-female power relations, the dis-balances between that, the subversion between that, the breach in that power relation is shown with enormous clarity.

So, I think that reading Nagamandala through the lines of folklore as Karnad himself has said, giving it a more Carnatic originality is what Karnad's perspective was. It has been fully successful, thereby giving Nagamandala a strong base and a strong spinal cord where folklore becomes almost identical which looks back to the past and almost brings back the past to the present, thereby creating a proper balance in what we know as the modernity of this text as well as giving it a folkloric and as well as metaphorical representation which is immensely profound and significant. So, thanks for hearing.