

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Nagamandala Part – 4

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For this session is, read certain dialogues and commentary that I find exciting and offer you my reading of those dialogues. Act 2, we have Naga making a full-fledged entry on to the stage. And if you look at that opening exchange, it's a very different exchange to the one that we see between Appanna and Rani. Let me read a few of those exchanges.

'Rani says, You

Naga: Don't get up

But when did you come, shall I serve the food? Asks Rani.

Naga (laughs): Food at midnight!

Rani: Then something else, perhaps? (She does not know what to say, stands dazed leaning against the wall)

Why don't you sit, are you so afraid of me? (She shakes her head) Then sit down. No? I will go and sit there away from you, will you at least sit then? (Moves away, sits on the floor at a distance from her. Now Rani sits on the edge of the bed, long silence she is dozing but, struggles to keep her eyes open.)'

I find this exchange interesting from a spatial point of view too. Look at the position at which these two figures are located. Rani is sitting on the edge of the bed and Naga is sitting on the floor, so that kind of special fixing gives us an indication as to the power reversal here at this point on the stage between Naga and Rani. So this is not Appanna of the daylight hours but Naga, so he is kind of in a submissive position at this point of time because of something else. So this is a courtship ritual and courtship ritual demands a particular kind of attitude from the male. So, you can also find this kind of spatial realignment where there is a power reversal for the male happening in some of our courtship poetry, from British literature and elsewhere too. So from that point of view, this is interesting.

And, 'Naga says you're very beautiful, Rani startled, what, do you want something? Naga, no, I said you are very beautiful, poor thing.' So, appreciation of beauty as well as sympathy for

the woman, for the girl, gets her sympathy for him. So, gets her, gives him the attention that he wants and he further says ‘that a tender bud like you should get such a rotten husband.’

That comment reminded me of Kurduvva and Kappanna, the sentiments are similar there. Sentiment which offers sympathy for Rani and anger or resentment towards Appanna. So, Naga seems to kind of offer the cultural commentary, he participates in that cultural commentary in which Kurduvva and Kappanna also participate. So, that is also very interesting to note.

And, it is very interesting to note that Naga wants to know more about her parents, her family and that once again gets the attention of Rani, just as Naga’s appreciation of her personal attraction, and you know anger towards her husband, which is he himself. Naga says ‘Now, don’t be silly, I am not a mongoose or hock that you should be so afraid of me, good, relax tell me about your parents, what did all of you talk about? Did they pamper you? Tell me everything.’ So, this kind of sympathy, again as I said, does the work. ‘What beautiful long hair like dark black snake princesses,’ Look at that comment, he is talking about her long hair, beautiful dark black tresses and he compares the tresses to snake princesses. It’s a very interesting comparison to make because, if you look at the closing lines of the story, the closing ideas of the story, Naga imagines her tresses to be like women, he imagines the tresses to stand for Rani herself, snake princess and he makes love quote and quote to the tresses. So, each and every part of this woman represents the woman herself. Each and everything seems to be the feminine ideal, the feminine identity, the sexual identity. So, that idea comes through in this figurative language.

Further on Naga says further again ‘Anything, tell me about yourself about your parents. Whatever comes into your head, if you want me to stay, tell me why, if you want me to go and say why.

Rani (pouting):What can I say if you behave like this?

Like what?

Rani says ‘You talk so nicely at night. But, during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a stupid snake.’

Naga laughs,’ There is dramatic irony there as you can easily notice ‘Naga laughs. “It’s very well for you to laugh. I feel like crying.”

Naga asked “What should I do then? Stop coming at night or during the day?”

Rani: Who am I to tell you that? It is your house, your pleasure.

No, let us say, (Naga says,) no, let's 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." '

What do you make of that very interesting comment? 'The husband decides on the day visits, the wife decides on the night visits. So, I would not come at night, if you do not want me to.' The night visits mean sexuality, the day visits mean her service to her husband, right? So, in a way if you want to read it further, the night visits are a sort of a reward for the day job that she performs to her husband. So the Naga is indirectly saying if you want your reward, you say yes to the night visits. You have the choice, you have the choice to welcome me or not welcome me at night time. The husband gives her no choice about the day visit, he will come, you have to serve, but if you want your reward at night, yes I will come. You can say yes or no there, is that point clear? So, it is a very complex idea which is being very sweetly put within the courtship domain, within the domain of love. That very disturbing notion is put to Rani, that disturbing choice is put to Rani. She does not get a choice during the day time, right? He will come whether she likes it or not, Appanna will come. So, that comment is very interesting there.

Page 44 in my book, they are talking about the King Cobra, its powers and so on and Rani here says, 'I do not feel afraid anymore with you beside me. Father says, her 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 change in colours in the eyes of the Cobra. It just stares, its wings half open as though it was sculpted in the sunlight.'

It just stares its wings half open as though it sculpted in the sunlight. It's a beautiful image there drawn through the language of Rani here. The point is the hypnotic effect of the Cobra and the freezing. The bird that freezes because of the hypnotic effect of the Cobra. So, we have a kind of image from the wild, where there is no escape for the bird and the Cobra will assert its supremacy over the bird. So, you can kind of draw it to this particular domain of Naga and Rani. Rani is kind of hypnotized, captivated, captured by the powerful King Cobra. She cannot escape, there is no way out and then, you can further draw this parallel and map it onto the gender domain and say it that the man has supreme power over the women and there is no way out for the female.

So that kind of inescapable capture is communicated very powerfully through an image which is called from wild nature, right? It is a very interesting but disturbing imagery that we have

here. Bird is food. Bird is food for the Cobra, the woman is not food, right? So, if you want to get at the core of patriarchal structures, keep asking questions, explore the imagery and you will realize the problematic imagery as well as the problematic double standards which are at play in this drama. So it is an interesting image which points to the double bind which points to the incarceration of Indian women in landscapes such as the one that we have depicted in Nagamandala. The inability, the immobility, the inescapability of the Indian feminine, identity is kind of really viscerally captured.

Page 45, Naga says, 'I will be back again at night, only at night

Not for lunch?

Of course there is always that. Listen Rani, I shall come home every day twice at night and of course again at mid-day. At night, wait for me here in this room when I come and go at night, don't go out of this room. Don't go out of this room, don't look out at the window whatever the reason and don't ask me why.'

As I read this, I realize one thing which is that with Appanna she is incarcerated in the house. She has the run of the entire house. With Naga, she is confined to that single room. He says do not go out of this room, wait for me here. So look at the, you know the shrinking of spatial freedom for Rani. He says don't go out of this room and don't look out of the window. With Appanna, she was able to look out of the window. Talk through the window, Kurduwa and Kappanna and so on, Kurdvva not Kappanna, Kurduvva.

But here it is. Her world is shrinking. And he says do not ask me why and Rani responds 'No I won't. The pig, the whale, the eagle none of them asks why. So I won't either. But they ask for it again. They ask for it again, so I can too, can't I?'

Two things. Rani is placing herself in a category with the animals, right? Pig, whale, eagle and Rani, right? She is placing herself on that kind of category. And the second thing is, 'they ask for it again', they ask for sex, they ask for basic biological needs, right? And, so can I too, can't I? So, I am asking for it too.' So, look at the degradation of this human because of these various societal structures which are kind of pinning her down. Eating up her space slowly inch by inch under different guises. For Appanna it is plain, you know, oppression. He is just enforcing his patriarchal authority as a husband. With Naga, it is something else. It is sweeter, it's hypnotic, it's mesmeric. But she gets eaten up in several senses of the word, right?

So, that needs to be thought about because usually we, what do we do with this play is that we tend to see Naga in a very sympathetic light, because he is a lover figure and then Appanna is just harsh, rude really, essence of a tyrant slash husband. So we condemn him, we sort of appreciate the Naga and things are all right. So, it's either this or that. I want us to kind of problematize the other two. Because in my reading, the other is, the other continues to be problematic because of the kind of spaces in which Rani is put and allowed in. So do pay close attention to the words of Naga too.

Further in act 2, I want us to think now about Kurduvva and Kappanna, the sub plot figures, those subplot figures are page 48 in my book. Kurduwa and Kappanna are squabbling about this spirit of a woman and Kappanna says, 'you won't believe me if I tell you, it was her again.' So, Kappanna apparently comes across the spirit which is 'haunting him' quote unquote and Kurduvva says, 'Why shouldn't I believe you if you talk sense. Just admit it is one of those girls, one of the girls from a nearby village instead of making up fancy stories about some.'

Kappanna says, 'She's not a village girl. Which village girl will dare step out at this hour? And I'm 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.' So, again we have one of those demon-temptress-concubine-victim figures.

So, this figure is apparently tempting Kappanna and trying to get his attention. You remember the three feminine roles that I talked about earlier, the first one was this victim, and the other is the temptress/ ogress/ concubine and the other is the figure of the old female, the sickly old female. So these are three major types of femininity that we get in Nagamandala and Kurdavva says here that 'Perhaps she is an ogress, she is an ogress, a demon with powers of demon birth or someone from another world, underworld. Someone from hell perhaps, nether world, always associated with hell. Perhaps a spirit. Why do not you just say who it is?

Kappanna: You would not let me

Kurduvva: When you talk like this, I feel we are falling apart. It's a fear I have never felt before.'

So, if you read this scene closely you will realize that this domestic harmony between the mother and son, Kurduvva and Kappanna is being broken by the presence of the spirit. This demon and this break-up of domestic harmony by a foreign female is a general theme in Nagamandala. Because if you look at the earlier anecdote, retold by one of the flames we have

a similar character, Story. Story wearing the saree disturbing the domestic harmony of an old couple. So and then, in another version, we have Naga disturbing the domestic harmony or the domesticity, because there is no harmony of course the domesticity of Appanna and Rani. So, that kind of idea is there running through.

Okay, further on, page 49 we have this Story performing the chorus-like function and then, Rani addressing the flames, that part is quite interesting too. Let me read that section, the closing lines of Story. 'She applied her ointment to the wounds, tended him, but she never questioned him about them. It was enough that he had returned.'

It was enough that he returned. That Naga had returned at night. Because, there is this attack on him by the mongoose, he is severely injured, so his absence for a number of days and then Rani pines for him and finally he returns. She tends to him, applies a medicine on his wounds but she does not question him. The fact that he is back makes her feel happy. Needless to say, when the husband came during the day, there were no scars on him.

'It gets dark on stage. Rani hurriedly lights the lamps in the house. As she does so, some of the flames get into position.

Rani (to the flames):' so we have that again metatheatrical moment of Rani addressing the flames, 'Wait now, do not be impatient it won't be long. It will open out, reach out with its fragrance. (Rushes into her bedroom, waits tensely. Suddenly jumps up, breathes in deeply) There it is. The smell of the blossoming night queen, how it fills the house before he comes!' The night queen is a beautiful flower; whitish, white coloured flower associated with obras. 'How it welcomes him. God, how it takes me, sets each fibre in me on fire!

(Naga comes in, they embrace the flames around them and sing, Naga and Rani dance)'

And then, we have the song of the flames. It is a fertility song, the essence of the song of the flames is a fertility slash song that celebrates sexuality and it has echoes of Shakespearean songs. Think of the Tempest, Caliban, Ariel and you are reminded of these figures when you read these songs.

Page 51, there is disturbance in domestic heaven. The disturbance is caused by the pregnancy of Rani. Rani tells Naga about the fact that she is pregnant and he doesn't react. And she is broken up by that and she says, 'What I feared has come true. What kept me silent has happened, you are not happy about the baby. You are not proud that I am going to be a mother. Sometimes, you are so cold blooded, you cannot be human.' Again, dramatic irony there, he is

not human. ‘(Forcibly puts his hand on her belly). Just feel, a baby is crouching in there. In the darkness listening to sounds from the world outside as I do all day long.’

It is very disturbing that she draws a connection between herself, her spatial location in this household of Appanna, and to the baby which is there, crouching in her dark womb. So the situation is pretty similar. She is also a baby in the sense that her individuality is not allowed to grow, develop, mature, be independent and likewise for the baby which is in its infancy, in the womb, right? So, that comparison is poignant, the crouching in the darkness is what Rani does all day, likewise the baby. She is aware. That much is pretty clear, she is aware of the fact that she is not allowed to enjoy the freedom of space and the freedom of the society, right? Further down, page 51 on the same page, Rani, Naga says ‘Sadly I realize it cannot remain a secret for long. That’s why I said as long as possible, please do as I tell you.’

Rani (blankly): Yes I shall. Don’t ask questions, do as I tell you. Don’t 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 story of Rani, right? Scowls in the day, embraces at night. That would sum up the entire play, I believe, those two statements. ‘The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change, don’t ask questions, do as I tell you.’

Again, that would sum up the status of the majority of women represented in Indian literature. He is silent, ‘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, not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit I could bear it now. But, now sometimes I feel my head is going to burst.’

Very important lines in the play. In fact this is one of the few moments where we have Rani, verbally rebelling against her straitened circumstances. She says, I am not a parrot, I am not a cat or a sparrow. Don’t put me on the same category as these animals and treat me like them, right? So, that resistance is coming through. She says I have a mind, why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade, this game to me?

If you remember yesterday’s session, we were talking about the idea of individualism, which is explored in western theatre, right? Karnad says that with Indian theatre we do not really explore this because we see an individual as part of a community, as part of a class, as part of a group, we do not celebrate individuality. And here we have a kind of a tiny spark where Rani

asserts her mind, her independent individual mind and says you know I can think for myself, why do not you explain? So that is a kind of a momentary resistance, rebellion.

Page 52, 'You don't want the child, do you? If I had remained barren, I could have spent my whole life happily trying to work out whether all of this is real or a dream. But this is no dream now, dreams remain in heads. This one has sent roots deep down into my womb. (suddenly) What shall I do? Shall I have an abortion? (Naga stares blankly) I may find a sharp instrument in the kitchen, a ladle, a knife or I can ask Kurdavva's help. No, it is too late, it is 5 months old, too big to be kept a secret. Forgive me, I know it is my fault but the secret will be out, whatever I do.'

Very painful lines in the entire play. If you read it, it's hard not to wince when you are reading the content of these lines. The sharp instrument, a ladle, a knife or I can ask Kurdavva help for an abortion. So, those are very very painful, poignant lines and look at the response of Naga. He does not respond to that pain at all. All he says is, 'It is almost morning , I must go. I must go.

Rani, it is almost as if she is waking up from a kind of a horror or a nightmare. She says 'What? I have to go' and Rani says gently, 'Go.' When you come across this word 'gently', again, it is associated with menace as well, I will come to that shortly. So, look at the response of the male figure to the fact that the woman is pregnant by him and she is not getting any kind of support from that particular male. And therein lies the horror, therein lies the horror of the patriarchal structures here. So we suddenly realise that Appanna is not much different from Naga and Naga is not much different from Appanna because Karnad himself, in this reading of the play tells us that Appanna and Naga are two faces of the same Indian male who is highly patriarchal. So, they are not two entirely different figures but two different faces, which is witnessed by the wife.

Appanna, page 53, 'Open the door!' So Appanna is attacking Rani, she has momentarily escaped from him and has shut herself up in the house. Appanna says 'Open the door, open the door, you whore! Alright then, I'll show you. I will go to the village elders. If they do not throw the child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna!' So, that idea does not need any interpretation there.

Further down, we have Rani meeting up with Naga and Naga offers a bit of advice. He says that 'You will be asked to prove the innocence by the village elders. Do not go for any other test, go for the snake ordeal.' And Rani says 'Snake ordeal? What is that?'

'There's an enormous anthill the banyan tree. Almost like a mountain, a King Cobra lives in it. Say you will put your hand into that anthill' s

Rani screams 'What?'

Rani is screaming. ' (Naga):Yes and pull out the King Cobra' advises Naga. Rani says, 'I can't, I can't.'

'There is no other way.'

'Rani: Yes there is, give me poison instead, kill me right here. At least I will be spared the humiliation. Won't the Cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I will die like a dog and a mongoose,' once again that, you know, analogy with the animal world is brought up.

Naga says 'No, I won't bite, only you must tell the truth.'

'What truth?'

'Naga: The truth, tell the truth while you are holding the Cobra. Tell the truth, while you are holding the Cobra.'

Rani says, 'What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say, my husband brought a dog then a mongoose to kill the Cobra? To kill this Cobra and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the Cobra will do or not do.

'Say anything,' says Naga, 'But you must speak the truth.'

'And if I lie?'

'It will bite you'

'God!' And then gently, almost menacingly, gently almost menacingly 'And suppose, what I think is the truth turns out to be false?' and Naga says, 'I am afraid it will have to bite you, what you think is not of any consequence.' What you think is not of any consequence, your thoughts don't matter here. 'It must be the truth. (anguish) I cannot help it Rani, that is how it has always been, that is how it will always be.'

You cannot change this, this has been the fate of women through the centuries. It will be the fate for women in the centuries to come. Perhaps. We don't know. That seems to be the subtext, that seems to be the interpretative of subtext that Naga offers to Rani. We don't care, what you say, it must be the truth. And the Naga, the snake will adhere to, will obey the rules and regulations of all these cultures, right? If you say, if you tell any falsehood you will be bitten.

Okay, we have certain moments in the play where we realize that Rani has her doubts about this man, this husband who comes at night. So, we do get it every now and then, so one such example is that -

Naga leaves, she says 'Listen please, wait' (and then rushes out. Runs through the front door, lifts her hand to open the latch and freezes.)

'But, the doors! I had locked it from inside and it is still locked.' The door that she has locked is still locked. A new thought occurs to her and our question is what is she thinking? What is she thinking? 'A new thought occurs to her. Almost unconsciously, she runs to the bathroom, looks inside, it is empty. 'Where are you, where are you?'' So, she has her moment of doubt and that is kind of nicely, you know, placed at interesting moments by Karnad.

And, then we have the trial court where we have three elders who are advising her, not to go through the cobra ordeal. They would prefer that if she, you know held the red hot iron while she made her declaration. So that is the kind of choice that she has. And the elder 2, look at the elder 2, he says, 'Your husband has registered a complaint, and we must judge its merits. We must judge its merits.'

And elder 3, he says 'You insist on swearing by the King Cobra, the news has spread and as you can see attracted large crowds.

Elder 1: This village court has turned into a country fair.'

The spectacle that we were talking about yesterday in our last session. The carnival, the carnival-like atmosphere, at the heart of which is a woman and her agony. And she becomes a kind of an entertainment for the crowds to consume.

'The village court has turned into a country fair, such curiosity is not healthy for the village nor conducive to justice.' Nor conducive, healthy to justice and our big question here is what is justice? What is justice? How is it manifested in Nagamandala, right? What is the nature of the justice that is meted out to Rani? So these questions inevitably arise in our mind. And he says,

listen to us even now. Elder 3 says, 'Listen to us even now. If something goes wrong and the Cobra bites you, not just your life but the life of the child you carry will be in jeopardy. We risk the sin of killing your unborn child, we risk being cursed.'

You get the idea of curses, it circulates in the psyche of the society here. There are curses everywhere, in this place we risk the sin, right? It is not that it is inhuman to put an unborn in jeopardy. We are just worried that we will be somehow affected if that child dies.

And elder 2 says, 'To risk over setting such a sin on the whole village and the village elders purely for a personal whim of yours is not right. Think again, listen to us, desist from the stupidity.' Do not be stupid. Go for the red hot iron test and that will be the end of the business.

And she says no, and she tries to go near the anthill but she is frightened and she withdraws and Elder 1 says, 'If you are afraid, there is no need to go through with the ordeal. Accept your guilt.'

Accept your guilt. So her very natural fear, very reasonable fear of the Cobra is interpreted as guilt talking. So look at the connection, look at the jumps in logic. And then we have Kurdavva appear. Kurdavva has apparently gone mad because the son is no longer with her. Kappanna is no longer with her and Kurduwa says, 'If only I had my eyes, I would have seen her. I would have recognized, but what can one do with these pebbles! When he tried to tell me, I did not listen, I was deaf. A temptress from beyond, a yaksha woman perhaps.' A snake woman. Possibilities are endless, the possibilities of the identity of the temptress feminine is endless. So, apparently this woman has come from some world, and taken away Kappanna. But, not a human being, no, what woman would come inside our house at that hour and how. She wasn't even breathing and so again that trajectory of you know, other-worldly females with magic wandering through society is always there. And Rani responds, 'Why should she suffer like this? Why should Kurduvva suffer like this? Would sight have helped the situation? Do desires really reach out from some world beyond right into our beds? Do desires really reach out from some world beyond right into our beds?'

What do you make of that question? It's a strange question, it's jarring question to me at least. How do you read that? Make a note of that question. Is that the problem, the basic problem of this play? Desire? Is every meaning encoded in desire? So, that idea should be explored further. What is the relationship between desire and patriarchy and problems created by patriarchal structures? We need to be a little bit clear here, what is the relationship between sexuality and patriarchy? So, explore the connection.

In my reading, the idea of desire, the domain of desire is a kind of a distraction that prevents us from exploring the real evils that incarcerate Rani. I would argue for that, desire as being a kind of a, as not being the point, it is beside the point, right? Anyway I will leave the answer to you, explore further the relationship between these two.

Page 59. Okay, so she does the test, she passes it with triumph, there is no issue. The Cobra does not attack her, it turns itself into something like a garland. It places its hood above her head and she is celebrated. Rani is celebrated as a goddess.

Look at the words of Elder 1, 'Appanna your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is goddess incarnate, she is goddess incarnate. Do not grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for relieving her divinity.'

So suddenly she becomes a goddess. From victim to someone who has been accused of being a whore, she suddenly has been placed on a pedestal and celebrated as a goddess. So, what is very interesting is that these are only the options available for women, right? You can either be a victim, oppressed, locked-up inside the house or inside the bedroom and treated as a sexual object, or you can be a sexual temptress yourself. The female can be a temptress herself. Thirdly she can be a goddess. So, these are all the available avenues for women in this particular play. And Appanna says, 'Forgive me I am a sinner, I was blind.'

Rani: Hush now! (She gently takes him in her arms, music starts in the background)

So, a kind of a resolution is reached at this moment in the play and I would like to reinforce that Rani can escape, the only way Rani can escape is by becoming a goddess. Nothing else would have helped her, nothing else would have saved her life. I want to finish up here, we'll continue in the next session. Thank you.