

**Modern Indian Writing in Translation**  
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**Nagamandala Part – 5**

**Length: 25:24**

Hello and welcome to this section which is going to deal with the two endings to Nagamandala.

If you remember in the previous section we saw how Rani is successful in the snake ordeal and she is celebrated as a goddess; and this is what Elder 1 tells Appanna, he is almost consoling Appanna, he says, ‘Appanna your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don’t 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 revealing her divinity.’ So, these are the words of encouragement and consolation offered by Elder 1 to Appanna.

When I was reading that word instrument, I was reminded of an earlier reference to the instrument that Rani talks about in terms of a possible abortion. So, it’s a very interesting choice of word to be used here. Of course now there is a reversal of circumstances from bad to the good for Rani. So, she is almost a divinity now.

And his advice to spend the rest of his life in her service. Elder 2 tells Appanna that you need to merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty. So, the tale comes to a neat conclusion. Rani escapes her fate and Story tells us that Rani got everything she wished for, a devoted husband, a happy life. She even got a lifelong servant to draw water for her house. For Appanna’s concubine was present at the trial. When she saw Rani’s glory, she felt ashamed, she felt ashamed of her sinful life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani’s house. In due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child, a son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant. So, the problematic concubine is somehow accommodated neatly, unproblematically into the domestic world of Rani.

And the son is of course a double blessing because the patriarchal lineage will be continued in the heir, in the male heir. So, the story sums up chorus-like and the flames think at first, that the story is over and everybody prepares to live and playwright, the man is exasperated and he says they are all in a hurry they are worse than my audience and then, he tells Story that he is dissatisfied with the ending. And Story wonders what is wrong and man says ‘Too many loose ends. Take Kappanna’s disappearance for instance.’ ‘Oh, that is Kurduvva’s story,’ says Story.

‘If you are interested in that one, you may find her yet, meet her unexpectedly as you met me here. In some remote place, even the market place perhaps or someone in the audience may know. Or you can invent the missing details that would be quite an order. I am only Rani’s story.’

What is interesting here is the flippant way in which Kurduvva’s story is dismissed by Story, the story teller, the female story teller; and it has reminded me of the reference to Ramanujan’s ideas about the circulation of folk tales which Karnad references in his introduction. So, the Story says, just as Ramanujan says, that folk tales are everywhere. We do not have to really go far. It may be a train ride away, you just may have to go to the kitchen to find your grandmother and you know, listen to the story. So, in that form just like the form of a folktale, Kurduvva’s story can be met with everywhere. You do not have to go far, says Story. Story says you can even meet her in the market-place or some of your audience might know or even you yourself would know in your psyche, the cultural psyche that is embedded in your mind. You can come up with the details and you wouldn’t be wrong. So, it’s a very interesting kind of cultural analogy to Ramanujan’s views about folktale which Karnad endorses.

But, the man persists. He says that the present ending does not work for me and the Story asks why not. ‘It is all right to say Rani lived happily ever after but what about Appanna, her husband? As I see him, he will spend the rest of his days in misery.’

So, as soon as the playwright says these words, on the stage we have Appanna in a frustrated light. Appanna asks himself, ‘What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even nature should laugh at me? I know I haven’t slept with my wife, let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess but I know. What sense am I to make of my life if that is worth nothing?’

So, in terms of form this is very interesting again, very metatheatrical. We have the playwright talking about the discordant elements in the drama and then suddenly we have a character in the play picking up the theme and reacting accordingly. So, that is very interesting, so if the director says that things are to be changed and the actor kind of picks up on that advice and acts accordingly.

The last line of that dialogue is what is interesting to me, which is ‘But, I know,’ Appanna says, ‘I know that I did not sleep with my wife. What sense am I to make of my life, if that is worth nothing?’ ‘If that is worth nothing’ - my question is, what is ‘that’? What is ‘that’ referring to? What does it signify there?

In my reading, in my interpretation 'that' will be a reference to the sexual non-performance of Appanna. He does not perform the act of consummation and that seems to be the basic tenet of the head of the household, right? Appanna is the master of the house and his job is to basically to perform that function of procreation, right? That inception, that impregnation has to be done and he does not do that and he questions his whole life, the meaning of his whole life. The husband's whole life is coming to nothing here and this also reminds me of Shakespeare Othello, where Othello, questions Desdemona's fidelity and he is convinced that Desdemona is playing around, that Desdemona is cheating on him and when he talks about it, ruminates about it, he says something like I have lost my profession, I have lost my purpose in life. Everything is gone. So what is interesting here is that a man's function, husband's function seems to be tied to this basic relationship that he has with his wife. And, that idea is kind of placed in the subtext here too.

Now, let me skip a few lines. Before I do that, of course apparently Rani also realises very clearly that these two men are entirely different. That the husband of the nights is not the husband of the daylight. And that is being captured through Story's words there on page 60.

So you can read that despite all that they seem to come together and smile, embrace and are plunged into darkness and happiness there. Page 61, we have the reappearance of Naga. Naga wants to know what is going on in Rani's household. He says, 'Why should I not take a look? I have given her everything, her husband, her child, her home. Even her maid. She must be happy. But I have not seen her. It is night, she will be asleep, this is the right time to visit her. The familiar road at the familiar hour. (Laughs) Hard to believe now, I was so besotted with her.'

Hard to believe now, I was so besotted with her. So, that statement makes us wonder whether that enchantment has worn off. Because, he seems to be kind of laughing at himself here. He goes into Rani's bedroom. 'Rani is sleeping next to her husband, head on his shoulders, her long loose tresses hanging down from the edge of the cot, her child is by her side. There is a quiet smile of containment on her face. Naga looks at the group, recoils in sudden anguish, covers his face as though he cannot bear to see the scene.' Only a few minutes, a few seconds earlier he said, hard to believe now, I was so besotted with her. So, what has gone wrong in the intervening period?

What has gone wrong in the intervening period is that he looks at the scene in which Rani is contented with her husband. So, he cannot meet that scene, he cannot face that scene, and he

kind of covers it up, he covers his own face. So, that he doesn't have to see Rani sleeping next to her husband. Naga says, 'Rani my queen, the fragrance of my nights, the blossom of my dreams in another man's arms, in another man's bed.' So, that is the problem, that is the discord. His woman, he sees Rani as his woman. And, that woman is lying next to some other man, 'Does she curl around him as passionately every night now and dig her nails into his back and bite his lips and here I am sloughed-off skin on the tip of a thorn.' Again that idea that I was talking to with reference to Othello and earlier to Appanna's doubt, right, about the meaning of this life, that is kind of echoed in Naga's life here too.

'Here am I, here I am sloughed-off skin on the tip of a thorn, an empty sack of snake skin. No, I cannot bear this! Someone must die.' Someone has to die, this does not seem right, somebody has to die. 'Why shouldn't I kill her? If I bury my teeth into her breast, now she will be mine, mine forever. (Moves to her swiftly but stops) No I can't, my love has stitched up my lips. Pulled out my fangs, torn out my sac of poison. Withdraw your veils of light, Flames.'

So apparently, love prevents him from killing her. Love prevents him from killing her. If you go back to those earlier lines, 'Does she curl around him? Does she dig her nails into his back?' That image is pure sexual image, right? And, that is what he is jealous about, the fact that this woman who has slept with him is now sleeping with another man, this is the real bone of contention in Naga's mind. That really annoys him.

And suddenly we have a reference to the romantic narratives. That shift is kind of not very illogical, I would say, considering the way the play has progressed. The way the story has flowed, we don't see a romantic gesture massively from Naga. The classic point of withdrawal would be that scene where she talks about aborting her child, you know, crudely, roughly. He is completely silent. So, if there should have been a romantic gesture, it would have been then, but then there are other complications in relation to myth and folktale and so on and so forth.

So, he suddenly makes a reference to romance and then, he says, 'I cannot kill her. Let my shame flow to way in the darkness, don't mock, gecko. Yes this King Cobra is no better than a grass snake. Yes, that is it. A grass snake. A common reptile. That is what I am and I had forgotten that. I thought I could become human. Turn into my own creation. No! Her thighs, her bosom, her lips are for one who is forever man, forever a man. I shed my own skin every season. How could I even hope to retain the human form? For me, yes only her long locks. Dark jet-black snake princesses.'

Look at the way the animal imagery is kind of used here. Here the King Cobra thinks that his hierarchy, his position at the top is kind of shattered. He is now as good as a grass snake, a common reptile and then this imagery is used to contrast the grass snake or to contrast the King Cobra with the human species. So in comparison to the human world, he is nothing, he is just a common reptile, right?

Who is at the top of the pyramid? It is man, and it is this man who is going to get the thighs, the bosom, her lips, the lips of a woman. So, for him he concedes, he kind of accepts his position, his lowly position in the pyramid, in the order of things. His position is so low, so he can only make love too dark, jetblack snake princesses. In other words, her tresses, her long black tresses.

So, what he does is, he kind of magically transforms himself into a tiny King Cobra and enters her locks. And then, he is discovered a little bit later and before that, there is a very important point which is that he commits suicide. Naga commits suicide by making a noose with the black tresses of Rani and kills himself. And the dead King Cobra is noticed by Appanna and Rani, when they try to find out what is the problem with Rani's over-heavy head.

And, Rani is really saddened by this and she says that the child, her child has to do the rites, the ceremonial rites that son does for his dead father. Appanna says 'Aren't you going too far? I mean that is done only for one's own father, I am still alive.' Rani says 'Please don't say no.' Appanna says, 'Of course there is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out.' And that is the end of that ending.

So, this is the first ending. What is once again interesting here is that since she is a kind of a representation of the goddess, her every wish is respected by the husband, 'any wish of yours will be carried out' and she gets what she wants. When she thinks that the child should do the ceremonial rights in commemoration of Naga's death. So, this is one ending.

If you look at that stage direction, 'Appanna exits. She sits staring at the snake. Her eyes fill with tears. Music. She bows down to the dead snake, then picks it up and presses it to her cheeks freezes. It gets brighter, the flames disappear one by one. The Story, of course, is gone.' The female story teller gives this ending and vanishes from the stage. That is one thing we need to remember.

The other thing is that Rani very clearly realizes that it is Naga who is the father to her son, which is why she is requesting all these rights which are to be carried out by her son. What is

also interesting in retrospect is the fact that Rani, even though she realizes that she is due quite a lot from the husband of nights, she doesn't demand it. We need to remember that, she does not demand what she is due from Naga.

That is what is interesting here. So even though some critics and some readers would see Naga in a very romantic light, we need to realize that she does not even get that space with Naga to voice out or even criticize, that would be more to the point, to criticize, really explicitly, the behaviour of Naga. This man who is apparently very sweet and apparently very considerate to her.

Okay, let's look at the next ending that we have. The flames, they ask 'Is it really over?' And, then one of the flames feels that it is again very unhappy. 'Why can't things end happily for a change?' And, then the man, the male playwright is pushed to kind of come up with another ending, right? It's a different ending to the ending that we have with Story. In Story's ending, Naga dies, commits suicide using the locks of Rani. Now, look at this one, man says, 'Alright, alright, let me try and offer a different ending.' Then, Rani finds out that something is wrong with her head, it is terribly heavy. She, you know, tries to comb her hair with the comb. And then, Appanna tries and then a live snake falls out. Appanna says, 'A snake! Stay away! It is tiny, but it is a Cobra all right and alive. How did it get into your hair? Thank God for your thick tresses, they have saved you. Wait, we must kill it!' (Backs away from the snake then runs out shutting the bedroom door behind him. Searches for a stick in the kitchen, Rani watches the snake transfixed.) Appanna: Isn't there a stick anywhere here?

Rani (softly to the Cobra): You, what are you doing here? He will kill you, go, go away. No, not that way, he is there. What shall we do? What shall we do? Why did you ever come in here stupid?

The word stupid, the adjective stupid is earlier addressed in conjunction with Naga in several dramatic ironies in the play.

'(Suddenly) My hair, of course! Come quick, climb into it! (She lets her hair down to the floor) Quick now, get in. Are you safely in there? Good, now stay there and lie still, you don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?

(Appanna comes in with a stick) It went that way towards the bathroom. (Appanna rushed out of the bedroom towards the bathroom, looking for the snake. Rani pats her hair) This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily forever.'

And that's it. Everything is finished in terms of the story of Rani and Appanna. And then we have the playwright who is getting up and then who is bowing the audience and leaving.

Let's go back to that last line of Rani, 'this hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily forever.' There is a lot of irony there, very clear irony. In this monogamous institution of marriage, we have Naga, the lover, the lover of Rani's nights in her head; and we have her husband, the 'true husband' quote and quote, the true husband with her too. So there are three people here in this domestic setup at the end of the play. Naga who is trying to make love to the tresses, and then Appanna, the husband offered to her by society.

So what do we make of this ending? So this is the ending offered by the male playwright and it is massively contrary to the ending that is offered by Story where the discordant element, the sexual element of Naga is kind of cleared away, brushed aside, finished off neatly and properly. The patriarchal order is restored with a heterosexual unit at the centre of it. Here, things are quite different and how do we perceive this? Is this the postmodern solution to problematic patriarchal politics that we have represented in Nagamandala?

So, is this the way Rani breaks up the whole of, you know, power? The power of men in her life, is this the way she kind of tries to survive by accommodating everything in her life?