

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Nagamandala Part – 7
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Hello all. Welcome to the NPTEL session of Modern Indian Writing in Translation. Today, we 'll be discussing the play Nagamandala written by Girish Karnad.

First, let's look at the structure of the play Nagamandala. Nagamandala is a play written in two acts, it has a prologue attached to it. Girish Karnad uses a convention of play within the play in Nagamandala, and prologue becomes extremely crucial in giving shape to the play.

When you look at the prologue, you can understand that the audience see a man who is very desperate to stay awake all night because a mendicant has told him that if he is not awake for the whole night, he will die. So, he is trying to find alternatives to stay awake and he meets unconventional, non-human characters such as flames and a Story. And he persuades the Story to tell him her tale, so that he can listen to it and stay awake all night.

The man tells the audience that since he is listening to the story and he is compelled to pass on the story to others, the play is put on and the story of Nagamandala is staged. So the prologue becomes the frame story for the play. The idea of frame story is not new to Indian literary tradition. This can be seen in various other works, and it dates back to works such as Hitopadesha, Panchatantra, Ramayana and so on.

The Panchatantra is a series of interwoven fables, many of which deploy metaphors and anthropomorphised animals with human virtues and vices. According to its introductory narration, it is composed for the benefit of three ignorant princes and the central Hindu principles of neeti or the wise conduct of life is being imparted to them through these tales.

Apart from a short introduction, this Panchatantra story consists of five parts. And each part contains a main story called the frame story, which in turn contains several stories which is inboxed in it, as one character narrates a story to another. You can actually draw a lot of parallels between the narrative style of Panchatantra with that of Nagamandala.

In case of Panchatantra, the animals are anthropomorphised whereas in Nagamandala it is the Flames and the Story which is being anthropomorphised. So, what exactly is anthropomorphization or what is anthropomorphism? It is the attribution of human traits,

emotions or intentions to non-human entities. So, one may be confused about the difference between anthropomorphism and personification. There is actually a slight variation from anthropomorphism. Personification is the attribution of the human characteristics to abstract concepts. The flames and the story are given feminine attributes, although they are non-human entities in the story. The giggling and the idle chattering of the flames and the personification of the Story as a female figure dressed in a very colourful saree, it performs the function of attracting the attention of the audience to the play. Girish Karnad is able to bring freshness to the narrative style and he is, and this is kind of, and when you look at the structure of his plays, you can understand that he experiments with it a lot.

Let us, you can see when you, for instance when you look at the play Hayavadana, you can say that again in Hayavadana there is a frame story. In Hayavadana, it is Bhagwata who is a stage actor, who is a narrator of the story and he narrates the story of the transposed heads of two friends, Devadatta and Kapila. Hayavadana opens with a pooja to lord Ganesha and Bhagwata seeks blessings from the god to help him perform the play in a very good way and he introduces the central characters. But there is an interruption that is being created in, during this course of time. A creature comes into the stage and Bhagwata is baffled and he understands that the creature is half-human and half-horse, and he does not know how to make sense of it. The creature explains himself to Bhagwata saying that he is, his name is Hayavadana and he wants to become a full man and he is trying to find a solution for it. So, Bhagwata asks him to go to the temple of goddess Kaali and he says that she will have solution for all the problems. So, recovering from the interruption, Bhagwata returns to the play and the story is unfurled.

So, when you look at Nagamandala and Hayavadana, you can understand that Bhagwata and the man perform a somewhat similar activity because in Nagamandala it is the character of the man, the playwright, who binds and blends the frame story into the main story. In case of Hayavadana, it is Bhagwata who is a stage actor who performs the same function.

As I mentioned earlier, Nagamandala is a story within a story, or it is a play within a play and it not just has one story, it has many stories in it. It is a story within a story, within a story. On the first level, Nagamandala deals with the frame story which involves the man, the Flames and the Story which is personified. And on the second level it talks about the main crux of the play which is a story of Appanna, the story of Rani and Naga.

And you can also witness parallel stories also in this play, the parallel story is that of Kurduvva , Kappanna and the Yaksha women, or the women from the nether world. One can see that the

story of Nagamandala, the play Nagamandala is highly metatheatrical in nature. Metatheatre describes the aspects of the play that draws attention to its nature as drama or theatre. It includes the direct address of the audience, expression of an awareness of the presence of the audience, and an acknowledgement of the fact that the people who are performing are actors. Some of the conventions that are being used in metatheatres are play within play, references to acting, theatre, references to the art of theatre, dramatic writing and spectatorship.

When you look at the traditional theatre and that of metatheatre, we understand that in traditional theatre, the actors or the playwright wants the audience to empathize with the characters. They want the audience to feel that what they are seeing is real and it is and they want the audience to feel a connection with what is being staged. But on the contrary you can understand that, metatheatre wants to break this connection. They don't want the audience to feel for what is being staged, they want the audience to understand that it is a play rather than a reality. So, metatheatre actually challenges the theatres' claim to be simply realistic. It begins by sharpening our awareness of the unlikeness of life to the dramatic art. It may end by making us aware of the life's uncanny likeness to art or illusion. By calling attention to the strangeness, the artificiality, the illusionariness and arbitrariness, we can say that, in short the theatricality of the life we live, it marks through frames and boundaries, the conventional dramatic realism would hide.

It may also present an action that is so alien, improbable, stylised or absurd that we are forced to acknowledge the estranging frame that encases a whole play. Metatheatre also breaks the frame of the fourth wall convention which is a convention that is being used by the traditional theatre and they may even reach out to the audience, they may assault them. Maybe verbal assault, so that they can draw attention into the realm of the play.

Fourth wall is actually a performative convention in which the invisible imagined wall separates actors from the audience. While the audience can see through this wall, the convention assumes that the actors act as if they cannot. Metatheatres also dwell on the boundaries between illusion or artifice and reality within a play. The metatheatrical nature of Nagamandala can be seen in the prologue itself.

In the prologue you can see that there is a man, the play, who is a playwright, who directly addresses the audience and he explains his plight to them. He also makes the audience aware of the fact that a play is going to be staged. He appeals to the audience to bear with him as it is

a matter of life and death for him. And he is left, and he also tells him that he is left with no choice rather than the play being done.

The presence of the man, the Story on the stage, and the flames at a distance is yet another convention used by metatheatre. Although the audience will be engrossed with the story they will be aware of the fact that you have these characters as well. So there is a break that is being achieved because they understand that what they are watching is not really a reality but a play. So they will develop, they will try to look at the whole thing critically rather than putting themselves in the shoes of the actors.

This distancing of the audience from emotional involvement in the play through jolting reminders of the artificiality of the theatrical performance is known as alienation effect. This was a central idea of the dramatic theory proposed by the German dramatist and director Bertolt Brecht. It aimed to invoke socio-critical audience response from the spectators.

The other instances from the drama, that can be picked up to show that Nagamandala is highly metatheatrical in nature, can be one in Act 1 where Rani, before putting paste that she had prepared out of the roots, before pouring that paste into the curry that she is supposed to serve to Appanna, she asked Story, the personified Story whether she has to do it or not. And the Story says, do it. She asked her to go with it. So, Rani does that. And there is also this instance, there is also the other instance where Rani does not know what to do with the curry that she just prepared and after pouring the paste of the roots into the curry, the curry had turned blood red and she is very scared by looking at the texture of it. So she does not know what to do and it is this personified Story which is present on the stage, asking her to go and pour it in the ant hill.

So, it is actually the Story which is steering the play in the direction that it wants it to go. So, if there, if the Story was not really present on stage, this can never really take place and we may not even be able to bring the character of Naga on, into this play. So, it is the personified Story which plays a very pivotal role in steering the drama in the direction that it wants it to be. So, that is also very metatheatrical in nature.

The character of Naga also brings out this idea of illusion versus reality because when you look at Rani, we can understand that she herself is not really sure whether this person is real or whether it is her figment of imagination. Metatheatre often explores this avenue of blurring the lines between illusion and reality, and it can be seen in this play as well.

Another aspect is the presence of the flames in the story as characters, and that idea is further cemented when they erupt into dancing and singing in the middle of the play and Naga and Rani also join them. In act 2, we can see that the personified Story narrates what is happening in Rani and Appanna's life to the audience. And towards the end in act 2 the story gives her version of the tale, and she is happy about it. She does not have anything more to say, she ends there. She ends the tale there. The playwright or the man who is listening to the story is highly unhappy with the loose ends and he questions and challenges her and so the Story says that she does not have anything more to offer and the playwright comes up with a different ending to the story.

So, the audience expect the play to end there. But the flames were also present on the stage is very much unhappy about this ending as well. So, they appeal to the playwright to come up with a different ending. So the playwright or the man again comes up with the alternate ending, for the story which is happy for everybody.

So, we can say that there are three endings for this very same play. The first ending is where Rani is raised to the pedestal as that of a goddess, and she lives happily ever after with her husband and her child. The second ending is actually, involves the character of Naga. He comes to Rani's and Appanna's house and he becomes very sad because Rani lives happily with her husband and he does not have any role. And he decides to commit suicide, and he commits suicide on Rani's long tresses. That is one ending, that is the second ending and you have another ending as well, where Rani allows Naga to stay in her hair, long hair and live there and she allows him to live there happily ever after. So, the third ending is a happily ever after ending for all the characters, be it for Rani, be it for Naga and be it for Appanna.

So, you can see that, in Nagamandala you have three endings and which is again highly metatheatrical in nature and it also allows the playwright to be ambiguous so that he can also explore this ambiguity in terms of the freedom that he can take on the kind of themes. This ambiguity actually allows Karnad to explore freedom that all of these three endings, actually gives an idea that the show, this play is, and it actually establishes the fact that this play is highly metatheatrical. And this ending also creates an ambiguity in the play which gives a space of freedom for the playwright himself and also for the readers and the spectators.

The way in which the play ends is also highly metatheatrical in nature. It ends like this. Rani picks up the baby, turns to the man, gives him a thumbs up sign and walks out triumphantly. It

is a very unconventional way in which the play is being ended and Rani's gesture means a lot in different ways.

The play Nagamandala also elaborately uses the convention such as chorus, mass, and it also brings out seemingly unrelated comic episodes and it also mixes human and non-human worlds.

The flames also perform the function of chorus in the play. After looking at the structure of the play, let us now try to understand, let us now try to find parallels that can be drawn between Nagamandala and other texts that we have discussed. When you look at the short story, the Hunger of Stones by Rabindranath Tagore, you can see that that story is also metanarrative. There is a story within a story, in that short story as well, just like Nagamandala. You can also draw parallels between the female characters of Hunger of Stones with that of Rani from Nagamandala. The solitary caging of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes a chastity belt of the middle ages. The decline of the women's talents to house work and keeping out of women from enlightenment and enjoyment.

In the short story, Hunger of Stones also, one can see the idea of the enclosure of women. If Rani is enclosed within these four walls, the women from the Hunger of Stones are enclosed within the white marble palace. They become the object of lust for Shah Mohammed the Second and they are also desperate to get out of that place just like how Rani is.

Amrita Pritam's Stench of Kerosene and Karnad's Nagamandala span out the lives of two different female characters, who mirrors every woman of Indian society. When you look at these two female characters, you understand that they do their feminine duties, or the womanly duties that they are supposed to do without questioning anybody. They are very obedient and they know what they are supposed to do, they are very submissive to the customs and traditions of their place, their age. When you look at Guleri and Manak's relationship, you can understand that their marriage is a very happy one for some time. But that happy relationship comes to a closure when Manak is compelled to take a second wife, obeying his mother and the customs.

Guleri's inability to procreate becomes very crucial in the story and it results in her tragic death. In Nagamandala, this idea of motherhood is, we can also try to, in Nagamandala, Rani does not know whether to be happy about being pregnant. But it instead actually heightens the dramatic tension and, in the end, it is resolved in favour of Rani. When you look at the characters Guleri and Rani, you can understand that both these characters are very childish in nature and they also gives you an idea, through their characters, we get an idea about the kind of restriction that

are being placed. Restrictions that are being placed on married women, and during those times. They are not allowed to go back to their parents house whenever they want to go. And they both yearned to be with their parents and they look forward to the day when they can go back to their parents house.

The double standards of the society for each gender is very much visible in both these stories, be it Nagamandala or be it Amrita Pritam's Stench of Kerosene. In case of Nagamandala, you can understand that nobody questions Appanna for his infidelity whereas Rani is compelled to go through various tests to prove her chastity to the villagers.

In case of Manak and Guleri, it is Guleri who has to bear the brunt of the family for not having a child. And she is removed from the family space so easily, leaving her with nothing else to look forward to. Whereas when we look at the character of Manak, we understand that he remarries, he also has a privilege of being a man and he has other modes of distraction and recreation, whereas Guleri is left with none.

In the play Nagamandala, Girish Karnad does not give any clue to the readers as to where the story is set, the play opens in an inner sanctum of a ruined temple. It can be anywhere. His choice of names for the characters is also very interesting to look at, as the names are very neutral and it can be any man and any woman and they can be from any region of our country.

The customs, practices and traditions explicated in the drama is true to most parts of our country. Rani embodies the idea of a typical Indian woman and on the whole this play transgresses regionality and becomes a representative piece of Indian literature and writing. That's all for today's session. Thank you all for your patient listening. Thank you.