### **Contemporary Literature**

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Good morning. So, we continue with Girish Karnad's play Nagamandala, a play which he wrote in 1990. As we have been discussing so far, the play reworks some of our legends and myths. So, it is Karnad's take on our well established legends and folk tales. So, what is a myth? Myth is something upon something which Karnad draws on very frequently. So, myth is defined as a story at which we can do nothing but wonder.

It involves the root of being and reverberates there. So, William Golding's definition. According to Northrop Fry, myth is a drive towards a verbal circumference of human experience. So, myth is a tale of wonder.

That is what we should take away from these two definitions. Now, what roles do myths play when Karnad decides to interpret or reinterpret them? In his representation of myth and history, Karnad focuses on those selected moments of cultural and historical crisis where individual choices had to confront the burden of culture. That is what we should understand from Karnad's reinterpretation or representation of myth and history. We will continue with, we are at the end almost. So, it is on page 39.

If you remember where we stopped, of course, Rani is oblivious to this. So, the cobra slides up her shoulder and almost takes the shape of an umbrella over her head as if protecting her and there is a commotion. There is the villages are overawed. They are totally enchanted by this miracle. It is a wonderful sight because they have never seen anything like this before.

They have never heard of anything like this before. The villages fall at her feet. Of course, she becomes almost like a goddess for them. The crowd surges forward to prostrate itself before her. Aparna stands uncomprehending the elder shout palanquin music.

They lift her into the palanquin. Then as an afterthought, Aparna is seated next to her. Now, see there is a reversal of roles. So far, Rani is the obedient, silent, unquestioning

one. She is supposed to do whatever is asked of her, whatever is, you know, whatever she is ordered whether it is by her naga lover or her husband.

She has to accept everything unquestioningly. Her husband is god. That is what she has been brought up to believe, but now the tables have turned. Aparna as an afterthought is made to sit next to her. Now, he is no longer important.

She is the goddess. He is not the so called god anymore, the husband, you know, the husband who is supposed to be her lord and master. So, it is the situation has changed. The couple is taken in procession to their home. Elder one, the village elders, Aparna, your wife is not an ordinary woman.

She is a goddess incarnate. Do not grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves in the world. You were the chosen instrument for revealing her divinity. Spend the rest of your life in her service.

So, you see, she was earlier, it was the wife. It was Rani who was supposed to spend her life in Aparna's service, but now things have changed. Aparna is asked by the village elders to spend his life in Rani's service. You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty. So, it is your privilege to be Rani's husband.

All disperse except Rani and Aparna. Aparna opens the lock on the door, throws it away. He goes in and sits mortified, baffled. She comes and stands next to him.

Long pause. Suddenly, he falls at her feet. Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind. He gently takes him in her arms.

Music starts in the background and the words they speak to each other cannot be heard. That is the story's story. You remember the story which came out of the old lady's mouth and the story wearing a sari and she is sitting on the stage and this is the story. So, the story is over. It is a happy ending of course and the story says, so Rani got everything she wished for a devoted husband, a happy life.

She even got a life long servant to draw water for her home. That is the mistress, Aparna's former mistress and once she witnesses the miracle, she repents for her life of sins and then decides to devote the rest of her life to Rani and serve her. In due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child, a son. So, she is showered with blessings, a devoted husband, a servant, a beautiful child, a son and that is Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant. Her last sentence is drawn in the hubbub created by the flames as they prepared to leave.

That was a nice story. Has it dawned yet? I do not want to be late etcetera. So, just like a bunch of audience, a regular audience comes and attends theatre, the flames also leave the stage commenting on, you know that was a good story and let us get home, let us get back home. It is getting late and all. Now, the man, the man who is the playwright, the storyteller, he is exasperated. These flames are worse than my audience.

Cannot they wait till the story is over? He does not buy this ending. You see, for him the story is not yet over. Same one, but is not it? Man, it cannot be. No one will accept this ending story, but why not? Man, too many loosens. Take Kapanna's disappearance for instance, you know because last scene Kurudavva was looking around for her son and if you remember, Kapanna used to see a certain figure, certain shape of a woman.

We are never told who exactly that person is, whether it is a ghost or you know any kind of an apparition, a supernatural presence, but who is it? So, it is left. It is very open ended. We do not know who that creature is and now, Kapanna has disappeared. Story oh, that is Kurudavva's story. You see, that is the beauty of a story.

In every story, there are major characters as well as minor characters and here, of course, this is Rani's story. Rani is a love triangle. It is Rani's relationship with two men. So, Kapanna and Kurudavva, they are just minor characters in this story, but some other day at some other time, there would be Kurudavva's and Kapanna's story where Rani and Naga and if they appear, they would play minor roles. So, we have to understand that is the nature of story telling.

Everyone cannot have the lead role, the leading part. 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 in the market place perhaps or someone in the audience may know or you can invent the missing details. That would be quite in order.

I am only Rani's story. So, you see, there are different ways of finding out about a story and I am not concerned with Kapanna's story at all. So, you can find Kapanna anywhere. Perhaps, you may bump into her somewhere in the market place or perhaps, some member of the audience, that person may know Kapanna's story, but not me. I am not here to tell Kapanna and Kurudavva's story. Even then, the present ending just does not work and why not? It is alright to say Rani lived happily ever after.

You see, that is what we expect most of the time, a happily ever after ending, but this man who is an intellectual, who is a thinker, who is a serious dramatist, he is unconvinced. He cannot buy this kind of ending. What about Apanna, her husband? As

I see him, he will spend the rest of his days in misery and now, we see another ending for the play. So, Karnad gives us a choice of endings, three kinds of alternative endings. So, you see, one ending is acceptable to most happily ever after.

The husband has been chastised and he returns home to his wife. They have a son and life is all roses for them, but the playwright does not buy this. You know, it cannot be the ending and because that does not explain what Apanna feels. So, now, we come to the alternative ending. What am I to do, Apanna? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even nature should laugh at me? I know I have not 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. Story, well then, what about her? Rani does not speak, but responds restlessly. The story is following dialogue. Story, no two men make love alike and that night of the village court, when her true husband climbed to bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new even if she had not known earlier? When did the split take place? Every night, this conundrum must have spread its hood out at her. Do not you think she must have cried out in anguish to know the answer, man? So, the story is not over then.

Apanna is not happy. He feels cheated. He is forced to live a life of lies with Rani. He does not accept that Rani is virtuous and that the child is his because he knows the truth. What about Rani? Rani has been with another man who looks although like her husband, but he is not really her husband. So, she has been with another man and now, when her real husband is with her, she would know the difference between the two men.

So, it does not make for a happy ending. When one says and they lived happily ever after, all that is taken for granted. You sweep such headaches under the pillow and then, press your head firmly down on them. It is something one has to live with like a husband who snores or a wife who is going ball happily ever after. It is a blanket term. Whenever fairy tales end with this very typical kind, very cliched sentence or cliched line and they lived happily ever after, it is taken for granted that they must be having a good relationship.

These nitty gritties of relationship, these complexities, these complications, they are not to be taken into account. That is the nature of storytelling. As the story speaks, Rani and Apanna come together, smile, embrace and apply it into darkness man, but that ending lacks something. Of course, the cobra and what becomes of the cobra because after all, he was such an integral part of the entire story. How can you just write him off? How can you just wish him away? Story is the cobra.

So, let us have him integrated in the story. One day, the cobra was sitting in its anthill and it thought of Rani and said, why should I not go and take a look? During the above dialogue, the cobra enters the house, takes on his human form. Naga, why should I not take a look? Now, see the story is being told from Naga's point of view. The ending is from Naga's point of view. So, far we had Rani and Apanna, but now we are having, we get to see what Naga thinks. 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, hard to believe now.

I was so besotted with her. Goes into Rani's bedroom. Rani is sleeping next to her husband, her head on his shoulders, a long loose tree hanging down from the edge of the court. Her child is by her side. There is a quiet smile of contentment on her face. Naga looks at the group and recoils in sudden anguish, covers his face as though he cannot bear to see the scene.

Naga, Rani, my queen, the fragrance of my nights, the blossom of my dreams, in another man's arms, in another man's bed. She curl around him as passionately every night now and dig her nails into his bed. Here I am, a slaughter of 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. Why should not I kill her? If I bury my teeth into her breast now, she will be mine forever. Now, he is consumed with jealousy. All those blissful moments of passionate love, they come rushing by and he just cannot let go of her.

I gave her her marital bliss. So, why should not I be the one to possess her? So, he is mad with rage, just gets carried away with jealousy and rage, but as he is about to bite her, he stops. No, I cannot, he says. My love has teached up my lips, pulled out my fangs, torn out my sack of poison. Withdraw your veils of lights, flames.

Let my shame float away in the darkness. Do not mock. Yes, this king cobra is now 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 a human, turn into my own creation.

No, I shed my own skin every season. How could I even hope to retain the human form? For me, yes, only her long locks. Remember the first time Naga and Rani meet,

he comments on her long traces. They remind her of a snake's coil. They are long, thick and dark and that is what he thinks of a dark, jet black snake princess.

They are like me, reptilian, cold, long. They are right for me. I shall summon my magical powers for the last time to become the size of her traces, to become so thin, so small that I can hide in them, play with them, swim away in the dark flow. So, that is what he desires to be, to be with her forever, presses her hair to his body, become their size now, enter her traces.

They have no sensation. They will not disturb her dreams. A beam of light on him, the rest is plunged into darkness. Long dark hair appear to descend and cover him. He covers himself and dances. Finally, Naga ties a trace into a noose and places it around his neck.

The stage slowly becomes dark, long silence. Then Kurudavva's voice is heard in the distance. Son, where are you? Kurudavva's voice. Kapanna? Aapanna? Yes. What is it? I thought I heard someone calling me.

Rani, the poor soul Kurudavva. Rani tries to sit up, groans and clutches her hair. My head, it feels so heavy. Remember, it is the cobra which is hiding there.

Can you give me a comb? My head weighs a ton. Let me comb my hair. He gives her a comb. She tries to comb her hair, but cannot. There is something caught up in her traces. Would you please, Aapanna, certainly.

He combs her hair, but he has to struggle to get the comb through. A dead cobra falls to the ground. A cobra stay away. They look at it from afar. Rani, oh, poor thing, it is dead. Aapanna, you know, it seems to have got caught in your hair and strangled itself.

Your long hair saved us, Rani. The elders were right. So, this is the second miracle that has happened in their lives. First miracle, when the cobra could not bite her. Second miracle, Aapanna assumes that the snake is there to bite them and because of Rani's long traces, he got entangled in them and died.

The elders were right. You are no common person. You are a goddess. He too finally accepts that. We are not important, but our son is the blossom of our family. He has been saved. He has been given the life of life by the cobra as by a father. So, Rani now recognizes it is the same cobra who is actually the father of her son.

So, she now knows that the cobra has made the supreme sacrifice for her sake, for the

sake of her family. A cobra, it has to be ritually cremated. When we cremate this snake, the fire should be lit by our son and every day on this day, our son should perform the ritual to commemorate its death. Aapanna, but are not you going too far? I mean that is done only for one's own father and I am still alive.

Rani, please do not say no. Of course, Aapanna says there is no question of saying no. Now, see how Rani has come into her own from someone who could not say a word in the presence of her husband. Now, she demands something which is so far fetched, but she wants her son to perform those rights for this cobra and Aapanna cannot refuse. What a change, what a shift in Rani's character from when we first see her and as the play comes to an end.

So, there is a total transformation in her character. He exits. She sits staring at the snake. Her eyes fill with tears. She bows down to the dead snake, then picks it up and presses it to her cheeks, freezes.

It gets brighter. The flame disappear one by one. Story of course is gone. His story is no longer interested because her story is this is not her story. Flames is it really over.

What a lovely tale etcetera. No sign of any light yet. Pity it has to end like that. Flame too, these unhappy endings. Flame four, why cannot things end happily for a change man, but death, it is the only inescapable truth. You know death is the final truth. You cannot escape it. So, you know every time we cannot grant the audience those typical, those familiar, cheap, happy endings, one has to accept this as well.

Flame five, do not be so pompous. Flame one, then why are you running away from it? If you are so, if you are not afraid to die, then why are you running away from death? Go and accept it. If darkness were the only option, we might as well have embraced it at home man, but that is how the story is.

That is how it ends. I am not to blame. Flames, stop making excuses. Now, see flames can also be taken for the members of the audience. They do not want this story. The first happily ever after the simplistic kind of ending is not acceptable to the writer. This tragic ending where Rani ends up weeping and pining for her dead lover is not acceptable to the audience.

This is too tragic. The story may be over, but you are still here and still alive. Listen, we do not have much time left. Get on with it for goodness sake. Man, all right, all right, let me try. So, now there is a third ending. So, you see there is every point of view is respected and that is what Karnad is trying to do here.

You know there cannot be a final definitive ending. He refuses to provide a specific closure to the story. There cannot be a definitive end to any story. So, he leaves it open ended.

You know we are given a choice of endings. Take whatever you want to. That is the idea. So, there is another ending now offered to us. The flames rush back to their corners and wait expectantly. So, now the audience is back and they want another ending and they wait. Rani and Aparna are sleeping with the child next to them.

Rani suddenly moans and sits up holding her hair. Aparna wakes up. What is it? My head, it hurts as though someone were pulling out my hair. Please, can you give me a comb? I cannot bear the pain.

He gives her a comb. She tries to comb her hair, but cannot. She gives the comb to Aparna. Would you please? He takes the comb, combs her hair as live snake falls out of her hair and lies writhing on the floor.

So, now look at the difference. It is not the dead snake. It is a live snake. A snake stay away. It is tiny, but it is a cobra. How did it get into your hair? Thank God for your thick trees. They saved you. Wait, we must kill it. He 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. She says softly to the cobra. You what are you doing here? So, she now recognizes it is her lover. He will kill you. No, not that way. Go away.

There what shall we do? Why did you ever come in here? My hair of course, come quick, climb into it. She lets her hair down to the floor. Quick now, get it.

Are you safely in there? Good. Now, stay there and lie still. You do not know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you. Will you? Aparna comes in with a stick and she lies to her husband. The cobra went away towards the bathroom.

Aparna rushes out of the bedroom towards the bathroom looking for the snake. Rani pads her hair. This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily forever. Now, with one act like this, she accepts the presence of her lover in her life forever and this could be another interpretation, another acceptable ending for the play. It is not too tragic, the melodramatic tragic. It is not the cheap happy ending, but now there is another twist in the ending, twist in the story where Rani gets to keep her husband, her son and

her lover as well and what a shift in Rani's character.

She lifts the baby up, starts feeding it. She and Aparna freeze. It gets brighter. The flames disappear one by one. We are back in the inner sanctum of the temple.

The man is sitting alone. He looks up. Sunlight pours in through the cracks in the temple roof. So, when the play begins, the moonlight pours in through the cracked roof. Now, it is the sunlight. It is morning. The man vigorously stretches himself, bows to the audience and goes out and that is how the play ends.

Now, at this point, I would like to draw your attention to the meta-theatrical aspect of the play. Now, meta-theater was a term coined by Lionel Abel in 1963 in a book called meta-theater. Some of the prominent features of meta-theater are the play within play structure as we have seen in Nagamandil and Karnad also very effectively uses the same structure in Hayavadana also a play which he wrote in 1971. So, play within play can be an insert kind of a play where the inner play is secondary.

Here, we have seen the inner play is primary. So, it is called the framed structure. This is the inner story. The play is the story of Rani, Aparna and Naga which is most important. So, it is the story, the man's story, the playwright's story, the flames and the story's story that is a frame. It provides for a very effective frame within which is contained the love triangle of Rani, Aparna and the cobra or the naga. So, the framed structure and play within play story. Then another characteristic of meta-theater is ceremony within the play and you will if you do a very careful reading of the play, you will find there is a wedding, there is an inquest, there are all kinds of games, there is music, there is dance, rituals, you have the procession, you have in one of the alternative endings, you have a funeral.

So, all kinds of ceremonies are contained within the play. Another characteristic is role playing within the play. So, role playing could be voluntary. Actors are playing their roles. Involuntary where you are, the actors are not aware that they are doing a role and then allegorical. So, you see the man is a man, Aparna is any man, Rani we call her Rani because she is a pampered, overindulged, only child of rich parents and of course, then you have Kurudavva, the blind one, Kaparna, the dark one.

So, very representative, very stereotypical characters which are representative, which are allegorical. We have literary and real life references. Now, we will come to it when we look at in Naga Mandala, you find it to an extent, but this kind of a, this characteristic of using literary and real life references, citations, adaptations, etcetera, etcetera, you find more prominently in Karnad's Hayavadhana and I will just read it out to you. Now,

of course, self-reference, self-referencing is nothing but calling attention to the play, to the artist's craft, to the work of art and as we have seen throughout the play, the idea that we are being told a story is very much present. The story begins with the man lamenting the fact that he has put audiences to sleep all these years.

So, there is, the playwright is being extremely conscious about his art. It is play within play and self-references, these are nothing new. Even Shakespeare used it and then later when a playwright like Tom Stoppard, he does a reworking of Shakespeare. Then for example, in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, there too we have a play within play structure which is extremely self-referential and self-conscious. So, these are the basic tenets of features of meta-theater.

I will read out another passage from Hayavadhana which will enforce what a meta-theatrical technique is all about. The play in a very classical tradition, it begins with Nandisthuti which is invoking the gods, taking the blessings of the gods. So, you have the role, a very typical standard role of the Bhagavata. Bhagavata is the narrator, the storyteller, is also the sutradhar, a character who remains on stage and who comments on the proceedings of the stage, whatever happens in the story as well as he can also at times play a prominent role in the play.

So, this is the way Hayavadhana starts. The stage is empty except for a chair kept center stage and a table on stage right. I will skip it a bit. At the beginning of the performance, a mask of Ganesha is brought on stage and kept on the chair. Pooja is done. The Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha accompanied by his musicians. So, see there is a ceremony, there is a ritual, the statue of Ganesha, the mask of Ganesha is placed on the stage and the sutradhar, the Bhagavata, he does, you know, performs the ceremony and seeks the blessings of Ganesha.

May Vigneshwara, the destroyer of obstacles, who removes all hurdles and crowns, all endeavors with success, bless our performance now. So, seeking the blessings of Lord Ganesha, that is what is referred to here and this is also, this is a technique which has been directly borrowed from Kalidasa's, not just Kalidas, but also the classical writers of the Sanskrit language. I am going to read you out a passage from Kalidasa's Avigyan Shakuntalam, where after the invocation enters the sutradhara and look again at, you know, there is a reference to the invocation, you know, seeking the blessings of the, of the gods and then also sutradhara, who is a narrator, who is a commentator on the proceedings of the play and also he can also be at times be an actor, one of the dramatist personae on stage in the story.

So, after the invocation enter the sutradhara. Sutradhara, looking backstage, lady, if you

have finished dressing, please come here. Actress, sir, here I am, sutradhara. Dear, this audience is full of learned people and we are presenting a new play, Avigyan Shakuntalam, whose plot has been composed by Kalidasa. Therefore, let every actor be well prepared and all this is going on, not backstage, but on stage before the play starts, that we are now going to begin a play by, by Kalidasa, Kalidasa's latest, most recent play Avigyan Shakuntalam and we are presenting this play not before any riff raff, but extremely learned and informed audience.

So, we may as well be, well be well prepared. Actress, because of your masterly performance, sir, nothing will appear ridiculous. Dear, to tell the truth, unless the wise are completely satisfied, a performance cannot be considered masterful. For however expert one may be, there is still lurks in the mind, a sense of diffidence. Actress, sir, let it be. Give the command, what should be done next? Sutradhara, what else but delight the ears of the members of this audience.

Sing a song about the summer season that has just begun and is still enjoyable. Actress, surely she sings. Sutradhara, well sung dear, ah, your melody has transfixed the mind. The whole body of this royal theatre is motionless as in a painting. What play are we going to put on now to please it? Actress, but the honorable ones already ordered a performance of the unprecedented new play Avigyan Shakuntalam. Sutradhara, dear, it is good you have reminded me. For a moment, indeed I forgot for, I have been carried away by the haunting passionate melody of your song as King Dushyanta here by the swift running antelope.

And that is how the transition between the opening, the prologue and the main play is performed. There is an invocation, the blessings of the gods are sought, the members of the audience who are present there, they are praised and then the characters are introduced. There is a song, there is a performance and then how you know it, the entire song blends into the main story of the play that I have enchanted the way. King Dushyanta who is the hero of Avigyan Shakuntalam is enchanted or ensnared by the beauty of that antelope and thus begins the play. So, meta-theater in other words then serves to provide an on stage microcosm of the theatrical situation and such techniques as the use of parody, burlers and self references to draw attention to literary or theatrical conventions.

So, this is a major theatrical trope which is used to convey a number of meanings. In Karnad for example, he uses it to subvert certain established conventions. What does he do in Nagamandala? What does he subvert? The established notion or the understanding that women should remain unquestioning. Here, the ending is radical by any means. We are shown that at the end, the wife gets to keep the lover as well as her husband and why

not? It is not this prerogative of a male to be a pleasure seeker.

Women can also have desire and this is a very frequently occurring theme in all plays of Karnad. The same idea is presented in Hayavadana also which is the story of you know he blends two plays, two stories. The story of the man with the horse's head which was written by Thomas Mann, the German writer and also the story of Vikram and Vethal. The idea is that in an ancient city, an ancient Indian city, you have a woman Padmini and she has a husband Devadatta who is a learned man and intellectual. Devadatta has a very loyal friend who is a wrestler.

He is not an intellectual, but a body builder, a wrestler, a man who delights in doing all kinds of physical works. His name is Kapila. So, while Padmini is attracted to Devadatta's face and his intellect, at the same time she is also attracted by Kapila's physical strength, his bill. Her husband realizes this and he decides to make a sacrifice to keep his wife and Kapila happy who is his best friend. He goes to the temple of Kali and you know cuts off his head as and offers it to Kali and seeks the blessings of the goddess for his wife and his friend.

Kapila who is driven by guilt, he comes and sacrifices himself. He also chops off his head in the temple. Padmini when she returns and she sees both men dying, she is baffled and she prays Kali to restore these lives. Kali says that why do not you try putting these heads back on their respective bodies. Now, as in a Freudian slip, she places the wrong head on the wrong body. That means she places Kapila's head on Devadatta's body and vice versa. Now, she gets the husband she has always wanted, a man who is extremely intelligent, his head and who has Kapila's strong body, whereas Kapila gets nothing.

He gets Devadatta's body and his own and Kapila's head. Now, the conflict is who gets the woman and then it is where it is here that the story of Vikram and Vital is invoked. The idea is to establish the supremacy of the head over body. So, the man who has Devadatta's head gets the woman, although he may have Kapila's body. So, again Karnad uses the myth and establishes his own ideas about gender relations, human desires, sexuality, etcetera.

So, this is the way Karnad uses myths, legends and folk tale narratives in his plays. His folk theater derives from the open theater conventions of Bayalata and also that of Yakshagana, both extremely popular folk tale forms, theater forms in the state of Karnataka. So, Yakshagana also uses plenty of tales from Ramayana and Mahabharata and Karnad uses these tales, but reworks them in order to subvert the established notions and themes and the prevalent ideas about various social conventions and questions the

relationships that people have. He interrogates the socio-political, cultural and gender issues by reworking tales from our folk theater. So, there Girish Karnad, one of the most important playwright of our times along with Badal Sarkar and Vijay Tendulkar, but he is important in the sense in the way he uses the folk narration and folk theater in our literature. So, thank you very much. Thank you.