
UNIT 12 ADAPTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FOLK LITERATURE IN MODERN TIMES

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand

- adaptation and its relationship with “folk”;
- significance of adaptation as a practice in reviving “folk”; and
- adaptation as an process of recreation and interpretation of existing tales in a different socio-cultural context.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

What is ‘Folk’?

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary terms the word “folk” as “people in general”; and also identifies it as something which is “originating from the beliefs and customs of ordinary people”. Folk was also a medium of mass-communication. As Trilochan Pandey puts it, “Folklore in India today is regarded as one of the most important and effective instruments of social engineering” (Claus, Pattanayak and Handoo Vol. II n.p.). It has always tried to educate the masses and inculcate cultural values among the people through a mode of entertainment. Folk has never tried to assume the role of a preacher, rather it has always engaged itself in a dialogic mode with the society.

What is ‘Adaptation’?

Adaptation is ubiquitous in the present era and can be seen everywhere – in movies, television, music, internet, comics and video games. It is a trans-positional process, i.e. casting a specific genre into another generic mode – an act of revision in itself. This trans-coding can involve shift of medium (a novel to film) or genre (an epic to a novel) or a change of frame and context, for example, the story teller tells the same story but with a different fragrance. The word ‘adapt’, has its origin from the Latin word ‘adaptare’, which means ‘to make fit’. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines adaptation as follows: “Broadly speaking, the recasting of a work in one medium to fit another, such as the recasting of novels and plays as film or television scripts.” Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved most often by offering a revised

point of view from the ‘original’, adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalized. Yet adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts ‘relevant’ or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating. This can be seen as an artistic drive in many adaptations of so-called ‘classic’ novels or drama for television and cinema. But most often adaptations are considered to be “inferior”, “minor”, “secondary” and “derivative” with respect to the original text. They are found lacking in symbolic richness of the original text and the spirit of the book. As early as 1926, Virginia Woolf “deplored the simplification of the literary work that inevitably occurred in its transposition to the new visual medium and called film a ‘parasite’ and literature its ‘prey’ and ‘victim’”(Hutcheon 3). Adapters relate stories in their own ways – they concretize or actualize ideas, simplify selections, draw analogies, fuse two different tales into one, critique or idolize them. The stories are not invented, they are taken from elsewhere. It is therefore impossible to discuss adaptation without referring to the politics of intertextuality, since adapted versions share a discrete relationship with their source text. Like translation, adaptations are considered to be derivative and ingenuous, but one can hardly ignore their functional significance.

Folk and Adaptation

In some ways or the other we live and breathe stories; they constitute a major part of our being. In Indian folk tradition, we believe that stories have a life of their own, they are not mere inanimate objects of entertainment; Arthur Frank, in his highly stimulating book, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio- Narratology*, argues from a similar point of view. He aims to analyse how stories are in dialogue with one another, with people’s experiences and with societies. Frank draws heavily from Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic narratology. He believes that all utterances are dialogic in nature because they depend on the interplay of varied, and at times opposed, meanings. Stories do not belong to storytellers and story listeners because all stories are “reassemblies of fragments on loan” and “depend on shared narrative sources.” They not only contribute to the making of our narrative selves but also weave the threads of social relationships and make life social. Though distinct, genres of stories depend on one another, for there is no such thing as a pure genre, and all tale types have a symbiotic relationship with one another. Analysis demands that we learn from storytellers. “The primary lesson from storytellers is that they learn to work with stories that are not *theirs* but *there*, as realities. Master storytellers know that stories breathe (qtd. in Zipes 4). Folk stories are hence not only bearers of cultural symbols and codes, but are depictions of human values and insights that transcend the barrier of space and time. It is in this context adaptation recontextualizes and reinvents stories and prevents them from getting lost in abyss of time.

12.2 ADAPTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF NEEL KAMAL AND LAL KAMAL IN THEIR ANIMATED VERSIONS

About the author

Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder (1877-1957), writer of fairy tales and children’s literature, was born in the village of Ulail in Dhaka district. He lost his mother when he was nine and was brought up by his paternal aunt, Rajluxmi Devi, at Mymensingh. At the age of twenty-one, he moved to Murshidabad with his father. In Murshidabad, Dakshinaranjan started to write for different journals, including the *Sahitya Parisat Patrika* and *Pradip*. On completing his FA, he returned to Mymensingh, where he took on the task of overseeing his aunt’s zamindari.

Dakshinaranjan was attracted to folk literature and collected fairy tales, hymns, ballads and humorous conversations. Inspired by Dinesh Chandra Sen, he edited and published the material he had collected in *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907), *Thakurdadar Jhuli* (1909), *Thandidir Thale* (1909), and *Dadamashayer Thale* (1913). Rabindranath Tagore wrote the introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli*, which was also translated into German. Dakshinaranjan's work has given the folk literature of East Bengal a permanent place in Bengali literature. Dakshinaranjan was also well known as a writer of children's books. Among his children's writings are *Khoka Babur Khela*, *Amal Bai*, *Kishorder Man*, *Charu O Haru*, *First Boy*, *Last Boy*, *Utpal O Rabi*, *Banglar Sonar Chhele*, *Sabuj Lekha*, *Chiradiner Rupkatha*, *Amar Desh*, and *Ashirvad O Ashirvani*. He also translated fairy tales from different parts of the world in *Prithibir Rupkatha*.

About the Story

In a faraway land lived a king. The king had two queens, but one of his queens was a monster (*rakshas*). But no one was aware of this secret. Both the queens had a son each. Their names were Kusum and Ajit. Ajit was the son of the monster queen. Both grew up together and were inseparable. The monster queen had a sinister desire of feasting on her step-son, but obviously with proper spices. But her son was an impediment to this desire. She secretly got rid of the other queen by feeding on her blood. Due to her son's protection to Kusum, the monster queen was enraged and suddenly one night the horses and elephants in the King's stable died mysteriously. The king was bewildered. Next night he found that his son Kusum was captured by a huge monster. Before the king could act the monster queen cast a magic spell on him, and he was reduced to a spectator. The monster devoured his son in front of his eyes. Ajit woke up due to this commotion. At the sight of his brother being eaten up by the monster, he hit the monster with his entire might. The monster vomited a golden egg and fled. As her son now turned into a foe, the monster queen ate her son Ajit and vomited an iron egg. She was not at ease with those two monstrous eggs, and hence buried them in a bamboo forest. The kingdom was transformed into a haven for the monsters. People started fleeing from the kingdom.

One day when a farmer was cutting bamboo in that forest, he found those two eggs. When he threw away those eggs, out of those two egg shells emerged a red boy and a blue boy. They appeared to be the sons of a king – they had crowns on their head and swords in their hands. Within moments of their appearance, the two princes disappeared from the kingdom. Horrified at the sight of such a weird development, the farmer fainted. After walking miles, they reached the kingdom of a king, where monsters were equally powerful. Anyone who could get rid of those monsters in the kingdom were promised the daughters of the king along with the kingdom. Prior to Neel Kamal and Lal Kamal, many others had tried their luck, but had fallen prey to those monsters. The twin princes took permission from the king and waited for the monsters in a thatched hut. During the first few hours of the night nothing happened. Both the brothers felt sleepy, and decided to sleep by turns. Before Neel Kamal went to sleep, he asked his brother to take his name in case anyone knocked at the door. Being a descendent of the monster family, Neel Kamal was superior in strength. The monsters were aware of it and hence avoided him. When the monsters knocked their door, they were initially tricked by Lal Kamal. But when they came back again later, the elder brother Lal Kamal erroneously took his name first and the monsters barged into the room, only to be maimed by Neel Kamal. The king's kingdom and his daughters were handed over to the twin princes.

When the monster queen heard the news of monster's death, she conspired to kill both the princes again. Two of her messengers took the guise of foot soldiers and requested the twin brothers to fetch them the oil of the monster's head so that their king could be cured of paralysis. On their way to the land of monsters, as the twin princes sat under a *peepal* tree, they overheard a *byangomi* (an intelligent mythical bird that can talk as well as tell fortune) asking her *byangoma* for a drop of blood so that the infant *byangomas* can open their eyes. The brothers volunteered themselves for the cause and in return the infant *byangomas* promised to render their service as an acknowledgement of the benevolence shown by the princes. As they reached the land of the monsters, the brothers convinced the mother of monster queen (Neel Kamal's grandmother) that they were part of her family. The land of monsters was nothing but a necropolis, with dead, rotten bodies piled up all around. On one fine night, when the monsters were out of the palace in search of their prey, Neel Kamal guided his brother to a well on the southern side of the palace. Neel fetched a golden jar and spade from the well. As they opened the jar, a male and a female hornet came out of it. They were the *jiyon kathi* and *moron kathi* of the monsters. *Jiyon Kathi* and *moron kathi* were small sticks that could make someone live or die as per command. The life of a male monster was hidden in *jiyon kathi*, whereas the life of a female monster was hidden in *moron kathi*. As the hornets were brought out from the jar, the monsters felt dizzy, they came running after the two brothers. But before they could get hold of them, Neel beheaded *jiyonkathi* with the spade he had recovered from the well. Along with the monster grandmother, all the monsters were beheaded; the brothers wrapped her head in a cloth and brought it back to their kingdom. When they did not find those soldiers, they send it back to the monster queen. At the sight of severed head of her mother, the enraged queen assumed her original form and came after Neel Kamal and Lal Kamal. This time too, before the queen could pounce upon them, Lal Kamal exacted his revenge and killed her. On the death of the monster queen, the king was cured of his paralysis, and was united with both the sons.

About the Adaptation

Trilochan Pandey's paper, "Folklore as Mass media: An Introduction" speaks of the usefulness of folk media in terms of the needs of contemporary communication and information dissemination. He asserts the importance of folklore in developing societies like India, where the levels of literacy is extremely low. It emphasizes their pivotal role in educating youth, promoting solidarity within a community, and as an outlet for suppressed emotions by providing a means of escape from disappointments and frustration. While stressing the importance of folk as a form of mass media, he argues:

The secret of its effectiveness lies in the fact that the "folk" are not aware of its subtle ways of functioning. As a matter of fact everything is imported in the guise of entertainment and recreation. The folk do not really seem to be conscious of this. They simply participate and use folklore in their daily lives. A mother sings a lullaby, an old man narrates a tale and someone observes a custom. It is in this manner that important cultural wisdom is transmitted, imported and used where its use becomes necessary and the balance of cultures maintained. One should not lose sight of these and other characteristics of folklore when one thinks of mass communication as a factor in social change. (Claus, Pattanayak and Handoo Vol. II n.p.)

In this age of digitalization, folklore has found a new mode of expression. It has traversed a long way from being primarily a part of oral tradition to black and white print to the animated delineation of characters on celluloid. A major part of children's lore is still dominated by tales from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In this age of

gadgets, where parents are too busy to spare time for children's bed time stories or grandparents are frequently absent from the framework of the nuclear families, the burden of sharing the stories now rests with new age technologies. Thus, though the process of transmission has changed, the basic role of the folktale remains the same – as an effective tool of mass communication. Folk tales and tales from oral traditions are an important way of communicating with children. Acting especially as repositories of moral and social lessons and cultural/religious instructions discovered by grandparents and parents through time, these traditions have always been an important part of growing up. Along with our shift from an organic and pastoral style of life to a cosmopolitan lifestyle, the idea of folk has also been estranged. But, the lament of a lost tradition is not new, a similar voice of discontent can be heard, when Rabindranath Tagore wrote a preface to Dakhinarajan Mitra Majumdar's collection of folktales of Bengal, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, in 1907.

Is there anything more Swadeshi than *Thakurmar Jhuli*, *The Grandmother's Bag*? But alas, in recent times, even this bag full of sweets has come already manufactured from the factories of Manchester. Nowadays, fairytales from the West have become almost the sole recourse of our boys. The Grandmother Companies from our own country are bankrupt. If one rattles their bags, perhaps a copy of Martin's Ethics or Burke's notebooks on the French Revolution might pop out-but where are our princesses, our magic birds – *Byangoma* and *Byangomi* - or the gem of seven kings that lies beyond seven seas and thirteen oceans? (9)

Around the time of the first partition of Bengal in 1905, attempts were made to reflect upon the tradition of folklore in the noted works of Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar (1877-1957), Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866 -1939), Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury (1863-1915), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) and Jasimuddin (1904-1976). It was further noted that under the influence of the scholarship of Dinesh Chandra Sen, who played a pivotal role in recovery of Bengali folk literature, Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar compiled four volumes of children's folktales as mentioned earlier – *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Bag, 1907), *Thakurdar Jhuli* (Grandfather's Bag, 1909), *Thandidir Jhuli* (Maternal Grandmother's Bag, 1909) and *Dadamoshayer Jhuli* (Maternal Grandfather's Bag, 1913), with the sole motive of "collecting, conserving and preserving a fraction of the large floating oral literature concerning ritual, fairy, demons and tricksters that faced threat of extinction about hundred years ago (Maitra 57). Thus in the process of rejuvenating and preserving a lost tradition, the orality of folktales was adapted by the print media. However, in the preface to *Thakurmar Jhuli*, Tagore confessed his doubt about the efficacy of modern language to delineate the soul of folktales:

I was afraid to open the book of Dakhinaranjan babu. I was cynical about the ability of modern day urbane Bengali to capture its spirit. It is tough to preserve that spirit of folk in today's bookish language. I would have never attempted such a daunting task. (Mitra 11)

He goes on to praise Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumder for his ability to preserve the simplicity and idiosyncrasy of folk. Thus printing physically replaced the oral world of folktales. It remains debatable as to whether this change of medium has been able to preserve the spirit of folk; but folk, which would have otherwise been a part of the forgotten tradition, has, y this transformation, been able to find a place in the shelves of the urban English speaking population. Similarly, in recent years, mythological characters and folk stories have reinvented themselves in cinematic

adaptations of myths and folk stories (like the television series on *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Paheli* etc.), Animated depictions of these stories for children has breathed a new life into them. For a child today, who goes to an English medium school in an urban locality and belongs to a nuclear family, *Neel Kamal and Lal Kamal* has hardly any significance. From the world of Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse and Tom and Jerry, with which the child is familiar, stories of *Lal Kamal and Neel Kamal* or *Sonar Kathi and Rupar Kathi* or *Brahman and Brahmani* transport the child to a new world – a world which is totally unfamiliar, but still appears to be a familiar one.

The popularity of the animated version of *Thakurmar Jhuli* on Zee Alpha Bangla can be gauged from the fact that it was broadcast for two years continuously, from 2005-2007, backed by the financial strength of an enormous number of sponsors and occupying the Sunday morning prime-time slot throughout the duration of its broadcast. The available animated versions on *Neel Kamal and Lal Kamal* are neither neatly designed nor effectively executed, and in comparison to the Disney animation movies, they appear crude and amateurish. Yet the popularity of animated version of *Thakurmar Jhuli* on Zee Bangla testifies to the power of these stories. The visual depiction of the tale of two brothers not only popularizes it among children, but educates them about bonding between siblings in the face of adversity. It also speaks about supporting good against evil and about acting in unison in times of danger. Thus even in this age of gadgets and gizmos, folktales continue to educate the masses. This would not have been possible if we would have failed to imagine and interpret them in a new medium. People, who have grown up reading stories of Dakhiranjan's *Thakurmar Jhuli*, may criticize the animated rendition of the tales, but they cannot ignore their significance. Moreover they tend not to take into account the fact that even the multiple collection of folktales by Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumadar is not the original source of tales – they have been canonized over time.

12.3 ADAPTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA

About the Author

Girish Raghunath Karnad is a well known name in the field of drama, theatre and films. He has directed many plays and movies in Kannada language. He rose to prominence as a playwright in 1960s. His emergence marked the evolution of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada, just as it happened in the case of Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi. He chose to write in his adopted language Kannada, and not in his mother tongue, which was Konkani. His plays have been translated into several Indian languages and directed by eminent directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, B. V. Karanth, Alyque Padamsee, Prasanna, Arvind Gaur, Satyadev Dubey, Vijaya Mehta, Shyamanand Jalan and Amal Allana. Over the past few decades he has been a highly popular face in the world cinema and television. He has been creatively involved as a director, screen writer and actor in both Hindi and Kannada films.

He was conferred the prestigious Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the Government of India. He won four Filmfare awards and innumerable national awards in different capacities. He has been honoured with Sahitya Akademi award, the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi award and the Sangeet Natak Akademi award. During 1987-88, he was at the University of Chicago as Visiting Professor and Fulbright playwright-in-residence. It was during his tenure at Chicago that *Nagamandala* was premiered at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. It was based on an English translation of the

Kannada original that Karnad himself did. *Nagamandala* (Play with Cobra, 1988) brought him the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work of 1989.

About the Play

Nagamandala is a combination of two tales – the tale of a story and a song and the serpent lover. Let us identify the tale of a story and a song as **story one** and latter one as **story two**.

Story One: Once there was a house wife who knew a song and a story, but she kept them to herself – she never told or sang them to anyone. The story and the song felt suffocated and tried to escape. One day while she was sleeping with her mouth open, the story escaped out of her mouth and took the form of a shoe and sat outside, and the song took the form of a coat and hung itself from a peg. When her husband returned home, he enquired about the coat and the shoe, but the woman was clueless. He grew suspicious of her and both of them started to quarrel. In a fit of anger the man took his blanket and went to the Monkey Temple to sleep. The woman too was baffled and unhappy at the sudden development and put off the lamp as she went to sleep. At night all the flames of town used to gather at the Monkey temple and gossip. On that night the flame of that woman's house arrived late. When other flames enquired the reason for being so late, he narrated the story of this couple, who quarrelled. He further told them about the revenge that the story and song exacted from the woman for treating them in such ungenerous way. The man was now convinced of his wife's fidelity and returned home. This story serves as the prologue of the play *Nagamandala*.

Story Two: It is a story about a woman, her cruel husband and her serpent lover. Kamakshi was married to a cruel husband, who, in turn, was infatuated with a harlot. The woman resigned herself to the designs of fate. One day an old woman from the neighbourhood offered her a magical potion that had the power of taming the unruly husband. The woman mixed that medicine with some sweet porridge, but to her horror she found that it turned red. Her faith in the magical power of the medicine started faltering and she thought, "This stuff, whatever it is, instead of making him love me, may make my husband crazy. It may even kill him. Let him be happy with anyone he wants. If he is alive, by God's grace, he'll come back to me some day." (Ramanujam n.p.) She poured that mixture into a snake's hole. A king cobra lived in that hole. The potion acted on it and it fell madly in love with that woman, Kamakshi. That night as usual, the husband was out. There was a knock at the door. The woman was surprised to find her husband standing at the door. She suspected nothing foul, and they spent a blissful night together. Similar nights passed by and soon Kamakshi was pregnant. But she never knew that the husband with whom she sleeps every night is a snake. The snake revealed its identity and narrated the incidents that preceded it. Soon the news of pregnancy spread in the village and the husband flew into a rage. He complained about it to his father-in-law. The father-in-law summoned her and interrogated her, but was not satisfied with her answer. The woman confided the developments to her serpent lover. He assured her that he would never allow anyone to harm her reputation and directed her to take the test of truth at the Shiva temple next morning. The woman went to the court of the king and asserted that the son in her womb belonged to her husband. She further offered to take chastity test by handling a cobra at the Shiva temple. Everyone agreed to her proposal. The court assembled at the Shiva temple. There was an awesome five headed snake coiled round the Shivalinga. Kamakshi took it her hand and it hung around her neck and swayed gently. The villagers were awestruck. They condemned the husband and invoked her as the incarnation of a

devi. She gave birth to a divine looking son. Her husband was no more in doubts. Along with the snake, Kamakshi tricked the harlot too, and enslaved her. The woman, her husband and their son started living happily. Her husband was transformed into a doting husband. Kamakshi, in her happiness, forgot the king of snakes. One night when her serpent lover came to visit her, he found her sleeping peacefully in the arms of her husband. In a fit of jealousy he hung her from her loose stresses which fell downwards from the edge of her cot. Next morning Kamakshi found her hair to be heavy. Wondering what was wrong, she shook it, and the dead snake fell to the floor. She was grief-stricken. She performed the funeral rites for the snake and lived happily with her husband and son.

About the Adaptation

You are already aware of the fact that *Nagamandala* by Girish Karnad is a combination of two tales – “the tale of a story and a song” and “the serpent lover”. In this section we will discuss the play *Nagamandala* and a movie with a similar title. But before we deliberate upon the adapted versions, let us try to comprehend the importance of adaptation of folklore. Folk is *lok*, the custom, tradition and culture of a particular era; it is the *vox populi* of a specific culture that resonates through different cultural tropes across generations.

Folklore possesses a very specific set of signifiers and symbolic patterns that are worth interpreting in their own right. “One of the reasons fairytale and folklore serve as cultural treasuries to which we endlessly return is that their stories and characters seem to transgress established social, cultural, geographical and temporal boundaries. They are eminently adaptable into new circumstances, and contexts, making them available for different versions.” (Atkinson qtd. in Sanders 82) For example Shakespeare reworked a popular folklore storyline of a father and three daughters; two ugly and vile sisters and one beautiful and virtuous. Later Kurosawa re-contextualised that same story for his film *Ran*, with a difference. In *Ran* the three sisters are replaced by three brothers and it also draws upon legends of the daimyo Mōri Motonari. Karnad opines that with the arrival of Ramanujan there was a renewed focus on Indian folklore. He interpreted the data which was ignored until then in a new light. The realm of the kitchen, where women are at helm of affairs, and the stories narrated within its walls witnessed a paradigmatic shift. On the occasion of the maiden A. K. Ramanujan memorial lecture, Karnad commented:

It is in the kitchen, while feeding the children in the evening, that stories are often narrated. The adult males are not present when the children are fed: they are served separately, much later. The oldest boy present in the kitchen is not likely to be older than eight or nine. And the other occupants of the kitchen are all female members of the family, of all ages. Thus although the story is aimed at some sleepy or obstreperous child, there is an audience of female members listening to the telling. Inevitably, the tale becomes a network of messages between those present. On a particular evening, the teller who is usually the senior member of the family although never the *mater familias* may even choose a tale to comment, however obliquely, on something that has happened earlier in the house. More significantly, the tale resonates within a world of women, barred to men, which thus reflects the values, sufferings, aspirations and fantasies of women. (“A. K. Ramanujan Memorial Lecture” 2012 4)

This transition of tales from male world to the world of females has shifted the agency to women. Students, when we see *Nagamandala* in this light, we perceive a complex aesthetic reality. The preface of the play draws directly from the A. K. Ramanujan’s “the tale of a story and a song”. In this version, it depicts a man, who

happens to be playwright, come to an isolated, dilapidated temple to die. It was prophesied by a mendicant that if he failed to remain awake for at least one night of that particular month, he would die at the end of the month. His sin was that he wrote miserable plays and bored the audience to sleep. He was ignorant of the potency of stories. It was the last night and he was supposed to die. But to his surprise he heard some female voices at the temple premises, and those voices were not human but naked flames without wick. All the flames gathered at the temple and narrated their scandalous domestic gossip. It is at this point Karnad narrates “the tale of a story and a song”, but again with a difference. Here the story and song take the form of a young woman to extract revenge upon the old woman, who never narrated or sung them. The story and song also arrived at the temple. It is important to note at this point that all except the male playwright in that temple compound are female. When the story was asked to narrate a tale, she despondently replied, “STORY: Thank you, my dears. It is kind of you. But what is the point of your listening to a story? You can’t pass it on” (Karnad *Nagamandala* 5). Karnad argues that stories are not inanimate frivolous narratives, they have a life of their own:

It also clearly states certain beliefs in our folk culture. Firstly, the flames don’t get extinguished at night when they are put out, they simply move from home to temple, and return to the wicks when the lamps are lit again next evening. Nothing in nature is ever totally extinguished. Secondly, the story makes certain statements about stories. For instance, where does a story live? A Western child may believe that a story lives in a book, ideally beautifully illustrated by someone like Arthur Rackham. In Indian folklore, a story lives inside the teller, literally, physically inside. And it is his or her duty to pass it on. If the teller fails to pass on this story to some listener, the story will take its revenge and she (it is almost certainly likely to be a woman) will suffer punishment.

There are some things you cannot keep to yourself. Food, a daughter, a story. You must circulate them. A story is not merely for entertainment it has an important social function. If you don’t circulate it you are not doing your social duty. (Karnad n.p.)

In the light of this quotation we can understand the pivotal role of stories in a society. Hence the man jumps out from behind the pillar and grabs the story by her wrist. He volunteers to listen to the story that she has to tell. She narrates it only on the condition that the story is narrated again.

Karnad’s version of *The Serpent Lover (Nagamandala)* is not only a creative appropriation of the folktale, but is also a commentary on the unequal power equation between two sexes. He imagined it in his own way. The play, like its source material, is playful in nature. The characters in Karnad’s play are more human than those portrayed in the folktale, yet the play has tried to preserve the essence of folk. Karnad has succeeded in portraying the loneliness, pain and anguish of Rani. She is left alone in the house; she is perplexed, hurt and frightened, but unfortunately, there is no one to listen to her woes. Hence she hallucinates and dreams of liberation from this life of captivity: “‘Where are you taking me?’ And the Eagle answers: ‘Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you’” (Karnad *Nagamandala* 11). But like all dreams, these too come to an end and it is finally her neighbour, Karudawa, who comes to her rescue. Unlike the original version of the story, the neighbours in the play are well delineated characters. Karudawa is like any other typical village woman, who is both intrusive and sympathetic at the same time. Karnad elaborates the episode of the love potion that

eventually compels the cobra to fall in love with Rani. As a playwright he works on the character of Karudawa and Kappanna and simultaneously gives them a tale to narrate. Moreover as readers we are also given a plausible reason behind the bride's decision of throwing away the love potion in the snake hole, due to which the snake falls in love with the woman and starts visiting her every night, but not without incidents that cause reasonable doubts in the mind of Rani. Born as a woman, she is taught never to question, protest or assert her claim on anything. At this juncture Karnad deviates from the original tale; unlike in the folktale, the serpent lover never reveals his true identity to Rani, which in turn exonerates her from the charge of being unfaithful. On the other hand, more often than not, folk hardly conforms to the principles and values that are forcibly imposed by society. In the folk version of the story, though the bride is initially seduced by her serpent lover, she becomes aware of his identity on the night before the public trial. Thus in the structure of patriarchal principles, she is guilty of adultery. But simultaneously, her unflinching love and devotion towards her lover, subjugating her husband to her wishes, insinuates at a subverted world order, where a woman is in charge of affairs. Karnad is well aware of the polyphonic nature of folk and hence he astutely manoeuvres the conclusion of the play with multiple endings. He deftly challenges the accepted world order:

STORY: No two men make love alike. And that night of the Village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier! When did the split take place? Every night this conundrum must have spread its hood out at her. Don't you think she must have cried out in anguish to know the answer?

MAN: So? The story is not over then?

STORY: 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 bald (Karnad *Nagamandala* 29).

Moreover unlike modern genres, he desists from narrating a story within a story and hence the audience never comes to know about the fate of Kappanna. Conforming to the tradition of folk, he never attempts to write a structured play and makes a serious endeavour to preserve the spontaneity, polyphonic voice and dialogic nature of the original version. Hence, when the audience was not satisfied with the unhappy ending of the story, on their vehement insistence, the MAN (may be the alter ego of Karnad) narrates an alternative conclusion to the story. The binary closure transforms it into an open ended play, where the audience is free to select and interpret.

12.4 LET'S SUM UP

Linda Hutcheon in her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, challenges the "negative cultural evaluation" of adaptation as a process. She perceives it to be an intertextual process, where works are created and received by people, which makes it human and experiential. It further opens up new interpretation in respect of different contexts and media. The discussion of *Neelkamal and Lalkamal* and *Nagamandala* substantiates the statement made above. The animated adaptation of *Neelkamal and Lalkamal* is an attempt to recontextualise the process of narration of some age old and popular folk story. Even if we consider adaptation as a secondary or subsidiary process, its importance cannot be negated in this age of electronic gadgets and media. Like print media, electronic media too has played a decisive role in preserving

and disseminating the popular folk forms in its new avatar. “Hopefully, the attempts and subsequent popularity of the digitization of the stories would lead to a preservation of this fast-losing flavour of folk literature.” (Mitra “100 years of *Thakurmar Jhuli* . . .” 10) On the other hand, adaptation of folktales, legends and myths for cinematic and dramatic versions often attempt to explore the hidden dynamics of a text. Karnad’s adaptation of folktales collected by Ramanujan for his play *Nagamandala* is an exemplification of the theory of intertextuality. He astutely integrated two different tales into the body of a single play. It is a fusion of Indian philosophy and ethos with the techniques of the western dramaturgy.

12.5 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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12.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 300 words.

i) What do you understand by the term “adaptation”?

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ii) Write a short note on Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar.

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iii) Explain the significance of digitalization of folklore in the contemporary period.

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iv) “I was afraid to open the book of Dakhinaranjan babu.” Why do you think Tagore was cynical about Dakhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s rendition of folktales?

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v) Nagamandala articulates Karnad’s philosophy on stories. Explain in brief.

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**Folk Literature: Sources,
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Classifications and
Functions**

vi) Write a short bio of Girish Karnad.

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vii) Where from do you think Karnad draws his material for the Preface of the play?

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viii) Who are Karudawa and Kapanna? What role do they have in the play?

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ix) How the role of the serpent differed in Karnad's Nagamandala than the one narrated in the original folktale?

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x) Comment critically upon the conclusion of Karnad's Nagamandala and the original version of the folktale.

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