



KARNAD'S THE FIRE AND THE RAIN – AN INTERPLAY OF RITUAL, PRO-SOCIAL MYTHS AND DRAMATIC REALISM

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ABSTRACT

Myths are generally accepted as the outcome of the primitive seasonal rituals, concerned with deities and demi-gods and consequently justified as untrue, fictitious and far removed from reality and history. In the context of Indian dramatic art myths play an integral and pivotal role for promoting a symbolical truth with higher degree of reality. Girish Karnad, however, following the Vedic interpretation – *pura api navam* ('though old, ever new'), holds that the significance of myth is universal and thus can be effectively employed to interpret and express meaning for the contemporary life. As myths represent 'collective consciousness' of a culture, he thought, can inculcate moral, religious or socio-cultural values; and also that analogically mythical interference can link the present human condition with the eternal and the universal. In *The Fire and the Rain* the age-old story of 'Yavakrita' has been used to bring out the consequences of 'knowledge without wisdom' and of 'power without integrity'. But amid the interplay of powerful passions and emotions of the mythic characters, the play serves to deconstruct the one dimensional nature of patriarchal domination and casteism rooted in contemporary Hindu society. If 'Realism' means 'objective experience' and 'social truth' then the play becomes a powerful weapon for exposing and demolishing social evils and injustices: it radically showers invectives against the vanity of the upper priestly class, their jealousy and possessiveness in love, treachery and mistrust, revenge and power-politics, their immorality and meaningless offerings without social concern. In the elaboration of the myth the fire sacrifice may connote any devotional activities, like academic studies, marriage or the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Furthermore, the deprivation and penance is after all the reality of a drought-affected land and the starvation and suffering of a famine-hit area.

KEYWORDS : Myth, mythopoeia, 'Vedic', realism, egocentric, patriarchy, power-politics, castism, 'Yajna', 'Universal Knowledge', 'fire-sacrifice', paradigm, nativistic

Myths embody universal knowledge of human civilization, unspecified by time and history; they are generally accepted as the outcome of the primitive seasonal rituals concerned with deities and demi-gods (legends and folk tales) and consequently justified as untrue, fictitious and far removed from reality. But many writers especially the Modernists have taken recourse to 'mythopoeia' or 'myth-making', thereby establishing a cultural connection between myth and literature. As a life form myth represents the relation of the individual self with the cosmic world and captures the reflexion of a whole culture ('collective consciousness') within the paradigms of archaic unity. Northrop Frye relying upon the mythic structures tried to evaluate literary works in respect to a timeless order. Carl Jung relates myths and archetypes with the unconscious and finds a universal source of wisdom in them.

In the context of Indian dramatic art myths play an integral and pivotal role for promoting 'a symbolical truth with higher degree of reality'. Myths and archetypes have been significantly related with human psychology and society and are enforced to preach the doctrines of theology and philosophy and thereby promote peace and morality. The *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* are basically myths depicting the everlasting struggle between good and evil and they consequently inculcate moral and emotional and spiritual values. Hence, even without factual base their universal mode qualifies them to be of contemporary relevance. Girish Karnad, however, (well aware of the Vedic interpretation – *Pura api navam* – that is, 'though old, ever new') discovers immense possibilities in myths and archetypes and effectively employs them to convey and express meaning for the contemporary life. He holds that analogically mythical interference can link the present human condition with the eternal and the universal; as D. Maya observes in reference to Karnad's plays: "Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and fables of the past which lend new meanings and insights through analogy, reinforcing the theme" (68). He rigorously follows the dramatic tradition, advocated in Bharata's *Natyashastra* and believed in Abhinavagupta's dictum that the purpose of drama is to realize the *purusharthas* (namely – *Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha*). Naturally his plays are mostly rooted in myths, folk puranas or in regional classical elements: *Naga-Mandala* is based on oral tales from Karnataka; *Hayavadana* takes its roots from *Kathasaritsagara*; whereas *Yajati* and *The Fire and the Rain* directly incorporate mythic episodes from the *Mahabharata*.

Our present discussion will be based on *The Fire and the Rain* which draws upon the myth of Yavakrita from the *Mahabharata*. M. K. Naik and S. A. Narayan remark regarding this play – "Karnad gives a contemporary meaning to an old legend which stresses the dangers of knowledge without wisdom, and power without integrity" (204). The basic myth is that Yavakrita, an Aryan youth successfully undergoes austere penance to acquire all knowledge from Indra; but true wisdom remains elusive to him. Consequently he tries to molest the daughter-in-law of Raibhya who curses him with death. Yavakrita's father, Bharadwaja in revenge prophesizes that Raibhya will die in the hand of his elder son which comes true as is fated. But Parvasu, the elder son intentionally accuses his younger brother Aravasu of patricide and makes him a criminal. However, finally it is Aravasu's prayer to the Sun-god that restores all and the God advises Yavakrita to pursue knowledge in the right way. Karnad here makes certain alternations and an addition of a subplot dealing with Aravasu's love for Nittilai. Karnad himself admitted that the structure of the play resembles that of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy, the chief motifs being the protagonist's homecoming after a long absence, human frailty and temptation and crime, the operation of the supernatural in human life and divine grace. But in Karnad's case thematic richness encompasses nativistic elements within the plethora of myth, that is, *The Fire and the Rain* intuits us about the social reality of an indigenous culture of a bygone age. It categorically comments on the relevant issues of castism, unequal attitude to women, the hollowness of patriarchy, the vanity of the priestly class and their power-mongering, jealousy and malice, mistrust and betrayal, adultery and power-politics, revenge and sacrifice without any social concern. In the elaboration of the myth the play becomes the key site of struggle between the Brahmin and the lower class, between the God and the demon, between the actor and the performer of rites, and above all between good and evil. If 'Realism' suggests an objective experience regardless of the individual perception – and reflects social truth above individual experience, then it has turned into a powerful weapon in Karnad's hands: for we must remember that after all in *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad's aim was to challenge the monolithic aesthetics of Brahminism and to demolish the one dimensional structure of egocentric patriarchy and obsessive castism.

The title of the play brings together two physical elements which are normally considered as antithetical. The 'Fire' becomes the symbol

of 'lust, anger, vengeance, envy, treachery, violence and death' (Naik & Narayan 205); whereas the 'Rain' stands for 'self sacrifice, compassion, divine grace, forgiveness, revival and life' (ibid.). Primarily what strikes us is that the play is concerned at the outset with the horrible reality of a drought-hit land. In fact, the "Prologue" starts with the consciousness of the striking insufficiency of rain: "It has not rained adequately for nearly ten years. Drought grips the land" (FR 1). As a result of which the land has lost its fertility which left the people hungry, suffering and dying in starvation and most of them fleeing away from the famine area. There are occasional references in the play of the consequences of famine and starvation: Parvasu's idea was that 'the famine had decimated all troupes' (2); Nittilai remarks 'there are very few men left because of the famine' (7); the 'starving villagers' waiting outside the city gate for the 'concluding feast'; even the drought has entered into human psyche for Arvasu speaks of his nightmare – 'I am dying of thirst. But there's no water' (59). Hence, the driving force of the entire play is ultimately a search for water ('Rain') which never happens nor is available until Arvasu's final sacrifice: in fact, the fire sacrifice around which the action of the play revolves is organized in order to appease the Rain-god. Realistically we are not unaware to the social injustice that lies underneath: gaudy and gorgeous offerings of precious materials are made to the God whereas the common poor people remain hungry for the lack of a loaf of bread.

The play staunchly reprimands the Vedic society which shuns all humane concerns like love and affection and foolishly engages itself in jealousy, vengeance and power-games. Yavakri observes austere penance for ten years for acquiring 'knowledge of the absolute'. But revenge was the ulterior motif. Dr. Iros Vaja comments "Yavakri's sole purpose is to destroy the happiness and reputation of Raibhya and his son Parvasu" (Vaja 130). Now, Vishakha, abandoned by her husband for a long time falls an easy prey to Yavakri's hypocritical showering of love. When Raibhya learns about the fornication of his daughter-in-law he viciously abuses her with beating and using abusive language, which are against the decency of social and cultural norms. Actually Raibhya has a case of venomous jealousy against his son's growing stature. So there is no filial attachment between them. As for Parvasu, even he is not free from these falsehood, pride and egoism; he is rather unmindful of his social and family duties; he is at the root of Vishakha's moral degradation. He himself out of insecurity kills his own father but out of a sinister design victimizes his brother with accusations of patricide. These meaningless hypocrisy and pretensions of the central characters have been debunked through Nittilai and Arvasu. Arvasu's simple and innocent way of looking at the things and Nittilai's practical outlook and her final sacrifice convey a truer and more profound concern for social betterment. P. Jayalakshmi opines: "only the innocent and kind Nittilai and the generous Arvasu have in them the potential to redeem the parched land, since they know what it is to be human" (251).

Now, the blind upward thrust towards gaining knowledge drags up the uncouth skeleton of the power-politics that lie hidden under the cover of dry learning. Raibhya, Parvasu and Yavakri all the chief characters aim at investing their efforts towards acquiring power and prestige even by following unlawful or unethical means or ways. First of all there is Yavakri whose austere *Tapasya* for knowledge is at the base – his extreme urge to acquire power so that he can be at par with the Raibhyas. His fantasy about raw power is distinct in his own speech: "This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me.... I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive" (FR 27). This also indicates the extent that he can go to achieve his goals. His degradation is apparent when he seduces his former mistress to fulfill his aim of avenging the ill-treatment meted out to his father. Raibhya considers himself intellectually and culturally superior to his son. In the core of his heart there was a hidden desire to be appointed to the post of the supreme power – that of the chief priest; which didn't happen. He veins out his frustration on his daughter-in-law (which also has sexual intonations). He kills Yavakri to affirm the superiority of his learning over others and also with a motive of disturbing Parvasu so that he is not leapfrogged by his

own son in the power hierarchy. In Parvasu's case the tale is even grimmer – he has achieved the most supreme position as a priest and the dictatorship of the fire sacrifice but his high ambition allures him to be equal with Indra: "I shall confront Indra in silence. As an equal" (FR 37). His desire of transcending human weakness is therefore no selfless absolution but only an individual attainment of Godly potentiality. It is evident that this game of power-politics has brought about their downfall and extermination.

This heinous power-politics has another outlet in its patriarchal subordination of women. Inferior and secondary status of women within the monolithic structure of patriarchy, their lack of control over their own destinies and the ultimate tragic end are distinctly evident in both Vishakha and Nittilai; though they are representatives of different social groups the ill treatment and the nature of domination is almost the same in the upper caste and the marginalized community. In Vishakha's case her very existence in an upper class highly erudite Brahmin family forces her into a state of identity crisis and she is also denied the bliss of self-expression. Her parochial living in the hermitage under the vigilance of her father-in-law marginalizes both her physical and psychic space and she becomes the victim of instinctual denial. Her husband, Parvasu hardly tries to establish any emotional attachment with her. He rather uses her material body for his own selfish spiritual benefaction: she becomes 'as instruments in a search' ('a guru') in the hand of 'an experimenter'. He abandons her at his whims for seven years and therefore she had had to embrace loneliness and solitude and silence. She herself defines her curtailed existence, as 'parched, and wordless, like a she-devil' (FR 18): and a little later 'I have become dry like a tinder' (19). Yavakri takes advantage of this vacuum that has grown up within her due to her unsatisfied physical appetite and also because of her dire 'need to talk'. O. P. Budholia opines – "Her long isolation in the hermitage bites her and she becomes a psychosis patient who desires for her immediate wish fulfillment with no concern for logic, morality... or the demands of external reality" (152). It is really pathetic that not out of any emotional longing but out of obsessive vengeance that Yavakri uses Vishakha only as an instrument for taking revenge (she is not even 'a pair of half-formed breasts'). Vishakha's humiliation seems to get completed when after learning about her adultery Raibhya vehemently exerts his patriarchal power by beating her and obscenely calls her 'whore', 'roving whore'. Even when she confesses to her husband she is left to suffer from the guilty conscience which ultimately leads her to a secretive, suicidal death. P. Jayalakshmi again remarks: 'she becomes the victim of lust of the two men' (256). Left among the preying men "isolated and ghettoized", Vishakha experiences denial of a meaningful role within the family, and hence in the public domain" (257-58).

Nittilai, the hunter girl marks Karnad's attempts of creating a 'noble savage'. She although enjoys a better freedom of expression and spontaneity and instinctivity, her domain appears restricted when it comes to the choice of her own life-partner. She had to face 'double marginalization' – primarily because of her lower caste and then under the dictates of gender demarcation she suffers marginalization. But in her case we find no visual effort of any practical resistance whatsoever that we have seen in Vishakha (at least Vishakha is critical of that male sovereignty). It may be that as she is closer to earth, Nature the pressure of oppression on her is somewhat reduced. She obeys the tradition and convictions of her tribal class and exercises a healing power on those around her; yet out of compassion and empathy towards Arvasu, she commits immorality by disgracing her husband at least from the perspective of a subordinating male gaze. As a result she is brutally murdered by the keepers of the male-centric tribal society. Her death is a blunt case of honour killing (predominate even nowadays). She immaturely dies 'like a sacrificial animal' – the unappreciable event legitimizes the ideology of patriarchal construct. On the whole so unlike one another they both fall prey to the same male paradigmatic 'subject-constitution'. Vishakha's barren life, her helpless surrender to the cultural ostracism and manipulation objectifies 'tragic anonymity'. But in Nittilai's case she deconstructs

the status of male superiority and in Arvasu's words metaphorically dies to 'provide the missing sense of our lives' (FR 70).

The subjugation and division among men is further aggravated by the pervasive class and caste consciousness. The issue is problematized through the love episode of Nittilai and Arvasu. As they both belong to different social groups, their respective social taboos, skepticism towards the other group and disparate convictions make their conjugal husband-wife relationship impossible. Faced with obstacles Arvasu becomes fastidiously critical of his own superior caste. Nittilai's father would get her married strictly in accordance with the tribal customs; Parvasu would hardly dream of giving consent to their marriage. The breach is clear which produces skepticism and hatred, - best expressed in the words of Nittilai's father - "These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them" (FR 10). Arvasu is determined - "I would rather be an outcaste.... (8), but he fails to appear before the marriage council at the prefixed time. He expresses regrets and vents out his frustration towards his caste which turns fatal to him. He feels himself intrigued, conspired and trapped by the false paradigms of caste hierarchy and for Karnad naturally he becomes the mouthpiece voicing and consequently demolishing the curse unleashed on man by this hypocritical caste consciousness: Arvasu pokes fun at the Brahmin community - 'No hymns to drown out one's voice. No smoke to hide behind' (FR 6); the brave assertion - 'I am not a Brahmin' is indeed unconventional. Andhaka, a sudra by caste, however, cannot come out of the preconceived formations of society and displays a 'manufactured consciousness': "The Gods that their (Brahmin) priest seek are far mightier than yours" (12). But it is again Nittilai who questions and exposes the hollowness and strikes a decisive blow towards the inhumanity of the so called high Brahmin culture: "Why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything?" In the portrayal of Nittilai, Karnad ('like an iconoclast') demolishes the *varna* system of Hindus.

There are various instances in the play when in the context of ancient Vedic society the superior caste consciousness of Brahminism arrogantly dominates over the low-castes. The darker side in manifest in that: the lower castes cannot enter a holy place or the sacrificial enclosure; rituals are to be performed only by the Brahmins. Arvasu, however, challenges the very base of caste discrimination when he shouts out: "All I want is to dance and sing and act" (FR 9). According to myth Bharata's sons who were the first actors of the world, lost their caste due to their profession. After that the Vedic society considers acting as lowly and irreligious activity. Hence, Arvasu becomes the potent crusader in defying that rigid norm. In the "Epilogue" we find that even the heavenly world of the Gods is not exempted from such demarcations: Indra bars Vritra's entry to the sacrificial precincts, as Vritra is an offspring of a demon mother. But the play's message seems to be clear: during the chaotic phase the villagers, invading the 'sacrificial pavilion' actually spell the death of hierarchical constructions of society: it's indeed 'The doomsday' for the power-maniac Brahmin community. Nand Kumar rightly observes - "Through the dramatization of the mythological episode of Arvasu's love for a tribal girl of hunting community, Karnad very significantly condemns and ridicules the caste system which has been social stigma for ages" (179).

Along with these major issues the play also embodies valuable insights into certain spheres of contemporary society like the complexities of fraternal relationship, love and marriage, nature of true knowledge, views on life, death and immortality, and above all it also include Karnad's observations on dramatic art. At first coming to the considerations of brotherhood we find that only jealousy and betrayal rule where true love and affection should have persisted. Arvasu expresses his sincere gratitude and respect for his brother: "To me he's been a mother, father, brother, nurse, teacher.... I owe everything to him" (FR 9). But what he gets in return is treachery and betrayal - Parvasu's unsympathetic, harsh cruelty towards Arvasu who has just performed the last rites of his father when he reaches the sacrificial ground, makes the boy guilty of patricide, 'a demon' who must be banished from the sacred precincts. In the "Epilogue"

this betrayal in brotherly relationships gets another parallel in Indra-Vritra episode; Karnad deliberately incorporates the episode in order to incite in Parvasu the pangs of guilty conscience. Karnad himself speaks of 'an unusual variant of this Indian obsession with patricide' (that is why, he makes Yavakri their cousin). It is no coincidence then that Arvasu plays the role of Vritra, the betrayed brother of Indra.

The play juxtaposes side by side both romantic love and marital relations and the obvious sexuality or lust for physical unification. Parvasu's social marriage with Vishakha is a disastrous affair: having no emotional attachment whatsoever, their loveless marriage has turned into 'an arid contract'. Being abandoned by her husband she falls easily into her past lover Yavakri's design. Apparently Yavakri's words seem so convincing that it impresses Vishakha and rekindles flames of love in her. Even we the readers are almost driven to put confidence in him when he says to Vishakha that he pined for 'the smell of (her) ... body' (FR 17); or that she is the 'presiding deity' of his life; or the more assertive "I love you, Vishakha. I have not looked at another woman in my whole life" (28). But immediately the author deromanticizes this when Yavakri confesses his ulterior motive of vengeance and retaliation. However, the uncompromising affair between Nittilai and Arvasu salvages boundless and unselfish love: Arvasu's response to Andhaka's reminder that his brother might object to his affair - "I can't give up Nittilai. She is my life. I can't live without her" (FR 8), speaks it all. On the other hand, Nittilai's love for him is beyond apprehension of a caste-ridden society: it's both romantic and spiritual as well. Neither possessed by physical or sexual consideration nor covered by the constitution of the civilized world, Nittilai voices Platonic idealism when she banishes any idea of extra-marital affair or remarriage: "I don't mean we have to live together - like lovers or like husband and wife.... Let's be together - like brother and sister" (FR 49).

Amid the rituals and ascetic practices the play illustrates the nature of true knowledge. Yavakri does *Tapasya* in the seclusion of the forest to obtain 'universal knowledge' of the Vedas directly from the Gods. But Indra advises him to pursue knowledge through experience and through diligent studies under a 'guru'. Indra's words are well applicable to any kind of devotional activities, like academic studies, marriage or the pursuit of scientific knowledge. That - "Knowledge is time. It is space." Yavakri fails to realize and consequently his 'Faustian knowledge' ('but probably little wisdom' (FR 16)) brings about his fall. His delusions for power and the fire of vengeance become his hubris which makes him blind to the fact that 'Knowledge involves control of passions, serenity, objectivity' (FR 27). Parvasu scholastically differentiates between methods for acquiring knowledge: one, the emotionally coercive method which forces the God to fulfill human urges; the other is the 'structured', 'formal rite' - which makes man 'an equal to god'. However, the veiled attack in the form of the tribal girl, Nittilai contradicts and debases all the prevailing concepts formal scholastic and spiritual knowledge. Her frank and intuitive curiosity cannot comprehend "what is the point of any knowledge, if you can't save dying children and if you can't predict the moment of death" (FR 11). Mala Ranganathan remarks: she raises "fundamental questions concerning the use of knowledge and the goal of human life" (Mukherjee 268).

Finally, the play while exhorting humanism and aesthetic experience of salvation also incorporates within its frame some of Karnad's own ideas regarding theatre and dramatic art. It explores the historical roots in order to comment on the birth of drama. The actor-manager explains - "Brahma . . . extracted the requisite elements from the four Vedas and combined them into a fifth Veda and thus gave birth to the art of drama" (FR 3). Karnad derives his ideas from Bharata's *Natyashastra* which records how through Indra it has been passed over to a human preceptor, Bharata. The book dealing with the origin of the drama espouses the view that initially the aim of dramatic performance was to rejuvenate the morality of a society, 'weakened' by 'irrational passions'. Karnad accepts the old ideology but imports to the performance an element of

'entertainment'. Now, the central metaphor of the play, the fire sacrifice – *Yajna* has often been interpreted in terms of the theatrical performance; Karnad himself points out in 'Notes' to the play of Kalidasa talking of the theatre as the 'desirable fire sacrifice of the eyes' (Notes to FR 80). P. Jayalakshmi carrying forward Karnad's thoughts comments:

Theatre is a desirable mode of expression for the human society since theatre like the sacrificial ritual 'involve(s) performance, precise gesture, speech, and a carefully worked out action' (Notes to FR 69), leading to enlightenment and grace (in the form of the life-giving rains in this play).

(Mukherjee 252)

Thus Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* along with its considerations of the social aspects also advocates Karnad's own views about the reality of the principles and practices of the dramatic art and perhaps it is best expressed through Arvasu when he asserts: "They say one shouldn't imitate! One should embody the essence. Only the essence!" (FR 13).

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