

CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF *THE FIRE AND THE RAIN*

Date and Occasion

The Fire and The Rain, a famous play of Girish Karnad, was originally written in Kannada under the title *Agni Mattu Male* in 1994-95. It was immediately transcated into English for a workshop with professional actors at Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, U.S.A. Girish Karnad also worked with professional. American actors at the Guthrie. Garland Wright, Artistic Director of the Theatre, who had also directed *Naga Mandla*, and Madeline Puzo supervised the entire project. The production at Guthrie could not materialize because Garland Wright left the theatre. It was translated into Hindi. Its Kannada, Hindi and English versions were remarkably performed and *Agni Mattu Male*. "has chalked up perhaps the most extraordinary performance record and range of reader responses among Karnad's plays." Its Hindi translation, entitled *Agni Aur Varkha* was performed for the National School of Drama Repertory Company. Arjun Sanjani produced the play, as a commercial Hindi film under the title *Agnivarsha*. He did his best to retain the original dialogues and incidents in the film. Sanjani writes :

It was the script of *The Fire and The Rain* that was most inspiring. It is something I found extremely powerful, contemporary in approach and set in the Vedic times and is a prime example of Indian thinking and Indian cultural ethics.¹

Source

The theme of *The Fire and The Rain* has been derived from the Vana Parva (Forest canto) of the *Mahabharat*. The myth of Yavakri occurs in Chapters 135-38 of the *Vana-Parva*. Sage Lamsha narrates it to Pandavas during their exile. Karnad "first came across the story of Yavakri and Paravasu, while still in college, in C. Rajgopalachari's

abridgement of the *Mahabharat*. That Rajaji, confronted with the stupendous task of abridging the world's longest epic to about four hundred pages, should not have discarded this seemingly peripheral tale is a tribute to his sensitivity and judgement."¹ Karnad adds: "It was fortunate for me that Karnad did not do so, for the moment's read the tale, I knew it had to be turned into a play. For the next thirty seven years, I struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications of myth within some sort of a manageable shape."² The dramatist acknowledges his debt to Arunacharya Katti of Dharwar, a purohit, who explained to him the importance of *Yajna*.

The Theme of the Play

The story of Yavakri deals with the misapplication of knowledge and spiritual powers that human beings receive from the gods after great penance. Yavakri, the son of sage Bhardwaj, acquires the knowledge of the *Vedas* from Indra after undergoing penance for ten years. He misuses this divine knowledge to take revenge on Raibhya, an intimate friend of his father. Both Bhardwaj and Raibhya are learned and are endowed with spiritual powers. Yavakri, Bhardwaj's son, nurses a grievance against all for he feels that his father does not receive the respect and recognition which he deserves. Bhardwaj cautions his son Yavakri against the misuse of knowledge. His fears prove well founded. To him knowledge is the instrument for taking revenge. They first think that Yavakri does is to corner Vishakha, Raibhya's daughter-in-law and he molests her. Raibhya also takes revenge on Yavakri. He creates a demon, a Brahma Rakshasa, and a spirit resembling Vishakha and sends them to kill Yavakri. The death of Yavakri makes Bhardwaj to curse Raibhya that he will be killed by his own son. Bhardwaj kills himself in remorse. Raibhya's eldest son, Parvasu, mistakes the deerskin, his father is wearing, for a wild animal and kills him. Parvasu, a learned man, also misuses his knowledge and he falsely accuses his elder brother, Arvasu of patricide and Brahminicide. Arvasu begins his own penance and worships the Sun God for attaining knowledge and enlightenment. The Sun God grants him a boon. Arvasu asks the Sun God to restore Yavakri, Bhardwaj and Raibhya to life. They come to life and Parvasu forgets his evil act. When Yavakri comes to life, the gods reprimand him for his folly and ask him to follow knowledge in the right spirit.

Girish Karnad introduces some significant changes in this story from the *Mahabharat* in order to impart dramatic effectiveness to the theme. In *The Fire and The Rain* Yavakri and Vishakha have been intimate lovers. Their love relationship both precedes and follows Vishakha's marriage to Parvasu. This is a deviation from the *Mahabharat*. She, therefore, is not a passive object of Yavakri's lust. In

The Fire and The Rain Yavakri does not molest her but coaxes her to have consensual sex with him. She agrees to it and says: "I'll give you the knowledge Indra's couldn't give you." Then, they go behind a dry champak tree on the bank to consummate sex. Vishakha confesses the consummation of consensual sex to her husband Paravasu.

At least Yavakri was warm, gentle. For a few minutes he made me forget the wizened body, the scratchy claws, and the blood, cold as ice.

Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar writes :

Her marriage itself appears to be an arid contract : after a frenzy of sexual gratification. Paravasu has abandoned Vishakha to Raibhya's care, and the relationships between the three are startling in their loveliness and malevolence.¹

In *The Fire and The Rain* Bhardwaj and Raibhya are presented as brothers and not as friends. Karnad gives this twist to the original theme in the *Mahabharat* in order to intensify treachery and deceitfulness between two highly learned brothers and their families.

In the *Mahabharat* Paravasu kills his father Raibhya out of ignorance. In *The Fire and The Rain* he deliberately kills him out of deep rooted hatred. Arvasu sees signs of life in brutally wounded Raibhya : "Is he alright ? We must do something. He may still be alive. There. His eye—lids—they're moving. Let's move him to—" Paravasu slaps him and declares him dead. Paravasu hates Raibhya from the very depth of his heart and does not want to see him alive. He says to Arvasu : "Stop it. Don't be a child. There's no time to howl and wail now." Paravasu is so deceitful and treacherous that he holds Arvasu responsible for Raibhya's death.

Karnad adroitly invents the story of Arvasu's intimate relationships with the tribal girl, Nittilai, in order to counter the superiority of Brahminism, which is represented by Raibhaya, Paravasu and Yavakri. Arvasu is the antithesis of the Brahminical order which believes in the display of erudition, austerities and penance but in reality indulges in jealousy, revenge, fornication, sexuality and deceitfulness. The tribal social order, on the other hand, is liberal and frank but mistrusts the Brahminical order. Nittilai asks Arvasu. "But what I want to know is why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything." This is a bitter comment on the Brahminical order. Commenting on the tribal order she says : "Look at my people. Everything is done in public view there." Dharmadkar says :

As an actor and as Nittilai's lover, Arvasu counterpoints the Brahminism and asceticism of the other male characters, and enables Karnad to systematically contrast the life of discipline and sacrifice with the life of instinct and emotion."²

Myth

The play within play in the Epilogue of *The Fire and The Rain* is also Karnad's creation. It has been included to emphasize the devastation caused by jealousy and treachery in familial relationship. On the celestial plane Indra betrays and kills his brother Vishwarupa, and humiliates Vritra. On the worldly plane Parvasu betrays his younger brother, Arvasu and indicts him of patricide.

The Treatment of Myth

Girish Karnad structures his plays—*Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga Mandala* and *The Fire and The Rain*—on myths, derived from various sources. The plot of *The Fire and the Rain* is based on the myth of Yavakri in Chapters 135-80 of the Vana Parva of the *Mahabharat*. Karnad has introduced many changes in the original myth in *The Mahabharat* in order to create dramatic effectiveness and to reinterpret it in the modern context. The basic framework of the myth has been changed but the basic nature and atmosphere of the myth remain the same as in the original.

The myth of Yavakri in *The Fire and The Rain* has been interpreted on many planes. Dharwadkar says :

In his elaboration of the myth, Karnad forges closer connections between the principal characters, gives them rounded personalities, and inserts an unambiguous intentionality into their actions.¹

Vishakha's marriage with Parvasu is not a union of two souls and hearts but is a means of sexual gratification. For a year their married life was a bliss but after that "happiness receded into background". She says to Yavakri : "His used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer.....Shame died in me. And I yielded.....Alone, I have become dry like a tender. Ready to burst into flames at a breath." When Parvasu goes to act as the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice, he leaves her to the guardianship of his father, Raibhya, a lustful old man, who sexually assaults her in his son's long absence. The relationship between father and son, brother and brother, husband and wife is complex.

The myth of Yavakri also exposes the dangers of the misuse of knowledge for realising personal ambitions and for taking revenge. The misuse of knowledge boomerangs on the evil doer. Yavakri attains knowledge to destroy the happiness and reputation of Raibhya and his son, Parvasu. He says to Vishakha :

One night in the jungle, Indra came to me and said : "You are ready now to receive knowledge. But knowledge involves control of passions, serenity and objectivity". And I shouted back : "No, that's not knowledge ! That's not knowledge ! That's suicide.....I want knowledge so I be vicious, destructive.

He fornicates Vishakha. Raibhya too misuses knowledge for taking revenge on Yavakri. He invokes Brahma Rakshasa and a look alike of Vishakha to kill Yavakri. He too misuses his knowledge. Parvasu, an erudite person, misuses knowledge to kill his father Raibhya intentionally. Karnad interprets the myth to emphasise that knowledge without love, compassion, social welfare, understanding and humanity can result in inflated egos, jealousy and destruction.

Characterisation

Characters are well-portrayed. Karnad has created complex and multi-dimensional characters in *The Fire and The Rain*. Yavakri is depicted with precision, minuteness and depth. He is learned but revengeful. He feels that his father a highly learned sage, is humiliated by his brother Raibhya and his son Parvasu. He burns with revenge. He needs knowledge for taking revenge. So he goes to the forest to perform austerities and penance for ten long years. One night Indra confers knowledge on him. He misuses it for taking revenge on Raibhya and Parvasu. He fornicates Vishakha and invites Raibhya's wrath. He takes the help of supernatural agency and gets him killed. Raibhya, who is also a learned sage, pretends to be moral and spiritual. He is an adulterous hypocrite who molests his daughter-in-law, Vishakha, day after day in the absence of her husband. He too misuses his knowledge. Raibhya's eldest son Parvasu acts as the Chief Priest in the fire sacrifice. He is learned. He is well versed with the Vedas and has ample knowledge of religion. He is proud of his Brahminhood. He is intentionally mean and malicious, and misuses his knowledge for the fulfilment of his selfish motives. His married life with Vishakha is arid and joyless. He violates the sanctity of married life. On the wedding night he assured his wife, Vishakha, that he would make her happy only for a year and after a year happiness vanished from their life. Parvasu began using his body and Vishakha's body as "an experimenter" and as "an explorer". He intentionally kills his own father, Raibhya and accuses his younger brother, Arvasu for patricide and compels him to observe penance and atonement for the death of their father, a Brahmin. He insults and humiliates Arvasu in the fire ceremony and provokes the royal guards to throw him out of the sacred precincts and beat him fatally. At last, he is consumed in fire, which is his expiation for the crimes he has committed.

Arvasu is a fascinating character in *The Fire and The Rain*. Although he is not erudite like his father and brother, he is proud and arrogant like them. He has a heart of gold. He is not proud of his Brahminhood. He falls in love with Nittilai a tribal girl and for her sake he renounces even his caste. He joins the troupe of actors because he takes interest in singing and acting. The profession of acting was reserved in those days for low castes. He is a silent sufferer. He owns the responsibility of patricide, an abject crime which his brother, Parvasu committed. Arvasu assumes a demonic role in play within play

temporarily. It reveals his real self. He is instrumental to the desecration of the sacrificial precincts and the death of Parvasu. The play ends with Arvasu's redemptive act of persuading Indra to release Brahma Rakshasa. He sacrifices his own happiness with Nittilai for the redemption of the Brahma Rakshasa. It is a noble act in the interest of the community. It begins to rain and people dance with joy. The crisis of drought in the community comes to an end neither by the fire sacrifice, performed by debased and vicious persons like Parvasu, nor by the performance of play within play. It is Arvasu's single humanitarian act, that resolves the crisis of draught and brings rain.

The two women characters – Vishakha, a Brahmin, and Nittilai, a tribal are portrayed as victims of society. Vishakha has no individuality. She is depicted merely as a sex toy. Her husband, Parvasu, uses her body for making various sexual experiments. In his long absence her father-in-law, Raibhya, rapes her like a beast. Her old lover, Yavakri, fornicates her. Vishakha is a miserable woman and deserves our sympathy. Her character reveals how women were ill-treated in the Brahminical order.

Nittilai is portrayed as bold, courageous, determined and virtuous tribal girl who falls in love with Arvasu. The tribal elders do not approve her marriage with Arvasu because they do not trust the Brahmins and think them to be treacherous and deceitful. She is married to a tribal boy against her wishes. Nittilai loves Arvasu from the innermost depth of her heart and sensing that his life is in danger, she abandons her husband, her family and her all for her love's sake. She caresses him when he is unwell. But her love is not sensual but spiritual. She will live with Arvasu not as a wife but as a sister. She allows him to marry a girl of his choice. In the end her husband kills her.

Style and Language

Girish Karnad has consummate command over English and he has successfully and artistically nativized it for expressing Indian ethos and sensibility. His diction is apt. His words are suggestive and reveal both character and situation. Economy and precision, clarity and lucidity characterise his style, for example, the following dialogue between Arvasu and Nittilai brings to light the fundamental difference between the Brahminical and the tribal social orders.

Nittilai : Not until we are married. Until then the girl is not supposed to touch her husband-to-be-That's our custom –

Arvasu : Mother of mine ! I'm about to jettison my caste, my people, my whole past for you. Can't you forget a minor custom for my sake ?

Arvasu : All these days I couldn't touch you because Brahmins do not touch other castes. Now you can't touch me because among hunters, girls don't touch their betrothed. Are you sure someone won't think of something else once we are married.

Karnad writes dialogue in-precise, pointed, lucid and idiomatic language which is remarkable for flexibility. He uses short and precise, simple and idiomatic expressions in *The Fire and The Rain*, as "a flake of cowdung", "everything rolled into one", "shame died in me", "a bandicoot in his ritual world", "wilful transgression of the rulers", "become a diamond, unscratchable", "sick of silence", "let the poison burn your insides than speak out", "Even their silences have double meanings" etc. Karnad deft uses modern expressions as "fuss-pot" and "field day".

Karnad employs abusive and derogatory expressions which exhibit the malicious feelings of characters. Raibhya utters vituperative language for Vishakha : "Why are you so filthy ? You look like a buffalo that's been rolling in mud". Raibhya reveals his strong dislike for his eldest son, Paravasu in abusive language.

The Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice sneaks out at night, crawls home, his face covered like a leper, and you think the god's won't know. They won't retaliate ? How could I have fathered two such imbeciles ? I told the King : "Mark my words, my son defecates wherever he goes. And he will defecate in your sacrifice.

Vishakha calls her father-in-law, out of hatred "a crab".

Similes and metaphor, symbols and images are abundantly used in *The Fire and The Rain* and they impart it a poetic quality, for example :

"I live in this hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil.
And words are like water — precious."

"Alone, I have become dry like a tinder."

"Like rats that pour out during the plague and die vomiting blood."

"Become a diamond ! unscratchable."

Proverbial expressions impart raciness and simplicity; for example : "You must always extract honey without ruffling the bees", "But you'd rather let the poison burn your insides than speak out" and "gods should not be trusted."

Karnad employs poetic language for expressing romance and love. Reminiscing his early love affair with Vishakha Yavakri says :

The trees were loaded with fruit. Many were ripe and had split open and the rich golden segments poured out. The sweet sick smell of the jack fruit, the maddening hum of a fly. The smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment.

Arvasu describes Nittilai's beauty in highly poetic language :

You look so lovely. All those patterns on your hand and face.
You're like a bride.

Conclusion

The Fire and The Rain is the most complex play of Karnad. It, says Dharwadkar, "reimagines the world of Hindu antiquity and constructs a