

A Palimpsest in Creation : The Question of Myth Adaptation in Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract

The ancient classical Sanskrit and Greek dramas mostly enacted stories from myth. According to the tradition of Indian drama, even the origin story of dramatic art is believed to be a part of mythic lore. A brief survey reveals that many ancient dramatists like Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Shudraka, and Harsha often borrowed from myth to create their plays. Mythic tales documented in the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and other collections served as the source of creation for most classical dramatists. It has been an ongoing process even before Girish Karnad started adapting and re-presenting myths. However, with Karnad's arrival myth adaptation gained much popularity in Indian English Literature. A brief survey reveals that early adaptations were meager and most of them adapted myth with a conscious awareness of fidelity. So, considering the perspective of myth adaptation, the paper aims to provide a comparative analysis of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and The Rain* and Vyasa's *Mahabharata*.

Keywords - Myth, Adaptation, Transformation, Myth Adaptation, Play

The objective of this paper is to study Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and The Rain* (1994) from the perspective of myth adaptation. For this purpose, a comparative study is attempted here between the story of Yavakri in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Karnad's *The Fire and The Rain*. The analysis aims to involve a discussion of the perspectives of addition/subtraction, transformation, and deviation. Considering the structural composition of the play, a brief discussion has been included on the prologue and epilogue of the play. For comparative analysis, I have selected the English translation of *Mahabharata* published by Pratap Chandra Roy as the source text.

The Fire and the Rain was first written in Kannad as *Agni Mattu Male* but later it was trans-created in English. In this play, Girish Karnad has adapted the mythic story of Yavakri from *Mahabharata*. This story can be found in chapters 135-138 of the Tirtha Yatra Parva from the book of Vana Parva (Forest Canto) in *Mahabharata*. Ascetic Lomasha narrates it to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their time of exile. The story of Indra slaying Vritra is partially depicted as a play that is being performed within this play. At the beginning of chapter 135, sage Lomasha also mentions the banks of river Samanga, where Indra performed his ablutions to free himself from the sin of killing Vritra. Perhaps this mention of the Indra Vritra episode inspired Karnad to include the story in the play.

The play is divided into three acts along with a prologue and an epilogue. Interestingly, the prologue and the epilogue here, do not adhere completely to either the tradition of classical Greek or Sanskrit plays. The prologue here situates the play and provides essential background details to the audience but at the same time it also remains an integral part of the plot. Similarly, the epilogues brings out a suitable conclusion which adds to the theme. Karnad adapts as well as transforms the idea of prologue and epilogue to depict the 'present' whereas the three acts in between explore the 'past'. In myth, the story begins with Yavakri's dissatisfaction with the treatment meted out to his father and his quest to attain universal knowledge through the practice of rigid austerities. But Karnad begins the play with fire sacrifice and in between the personal lives of the characters are depicted. However both the narratives end on a similar structural pattern, that is, the Gods descend and grant the boons.

Apart from the deviation in narrative and thematic development in the play, there is also an alteration in terms of relationships. Here, Bharadwaja and Raibhya are brothers instead of being friends as presented in the myth, though Bharadwaja is dead, thus remains absent. This impacts the relationship of all the characters of the play. Yavakri becomes the cousin of Parvasu and Arvasu whereas Raibhya becomes his uncle. Along with the important characters which are portrayed dominantly in myth, the neglected characters of Andhaka, Brahma Rakshasa, and Parvasu's wife also get attention in the play. As the character of Bharadhwaja is subtracted, the character of Arvasu's lover, Nittilai, and The Actor Manager is added. Parvasu's wife, who remained unnamed and voiceless also gains her identity with the name of Vishakha. Adaptation also helped Karnad to combine an amalgamation of diverse themes which reflect the anxieties of not only the Vedic era but also that of contemporary society. Concerning the multifarious aspects of the play, Arindam Ghosh states:

“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” (Ghosh 641).

The prologue of the play begins with the scene of fire sacrifice. It has not rained for nearly a decade. So, the king is hosting a seven-year-long fire sacrifice to propitiate the god of rains, Indra. Parvasu, the chief priest, is overseeing the conduct so that the sacrifice can be performed accurately without any error. The afternoon session has ended and the courtier enters with the Actor-Manager. He requests the king to perform a play honoring the fire sacrifice. Initially, the king is reluctant and refuses as Arvasu, the chief priest’s brother is acting in the play. Later after consultation with Parvasu and at the request of the Actor-Manager, the performance is allowed. The acting troop comes on the stage which consists of the Actor-Manager, his brother, and Arvasu. The king, Parvasu, and other priests sit in front with the public gathering behind them to watch the play. The stage dims, Arvasu is seen referring to Nittilai and talking about their plan of getting married. Nittilai, a fourteen-year-old girl comes on the stage and stand beside Arvasu.

Here, it is important to understand that in the Vedic age, plays were performed during any sacrifice or religious rituals. “The presence of an entertainment during sacrifices or in their very ritual is well documented beginning with Yajurveda, down to the Harivamsa” (Byrski 43-44). This entertainment refers to the dramatic performance, as Karnad himself mentions in the notes that the interval between the rites can also be devoted to the performance of plays (Karnad 77). On the other hand, in the last chapter of the *Natyashastra*, Nahusha mentions, “I wish this (Naty/Drama) again to be openly produced on earth, so that the sacrifices to be done on different days of the moon maybe rendered auspicious and happy” (Muni 559). This proves that dramas were not only performed during the sacrifices but the “theatrical arts” also “flourished along with religious rituals” (Varadpande 8).

Considering the paradigm of adaptation, three perspectives have been considered to understand how the mythic story has been adapted to suit the audience. The perspectives considered for analysis are - addition, substantial cutting, and rearrangement. The character of Nittilai, Arvasu’s lover is an addition to the mythic story of Yavakri. *Mahabharata* has no mention of Arvasu’s lover or his wife. So, the character added in this play is Karnad’s creation. Nittilai appears as a girl of fourteen belonging to the hunter tribe. This addition enables the play to depict the perspective of caste struggle as well as the cultural aspect of the situation of women in contemporary society. In this play, Nittilai’s marriage is subjected to the permission of the elders, as she puts it, “every young man about to get married goes through it” (Karnad 6). Similarly, in Indian society the groom has to approach the bride’s parents to take the permission for marriage as the decision for the bride rests with the elder male member of the family. Here, Nittilai’s freedom of choosing her life partner is limited to the customary obligation of her father’s approval. Considering the patriarchal restrictions on Nittilai, Abhishek Kosta states

“She has to act and move according to the rigid norms made by the male members of her community, in which men always had an upper hand. She could not marry

Arvasu without the consent of her brother and father, failing to do so she has to pay the penalty of being loyal to Arvasu” (Kosta 199).

Nittilai further mentions that according to the custom, until marriage, the girl is not supposed to touch her husband-to-be. This also hints at the taboo present in the Indian culture where a similar belief is held. From a different perspective, this depiction can be also considered as a sly dig at the cultural mores which specifically restricts the sexual freedom of a man and woman. On the other hand, Nittilai’s consent to such restriction also depicts how cultural values are ingrained in an individual through the accepted belief of morally correct behaviour. Arvasu’s words clearly explain that Karnad’s idea to include such an episode in the play was not without a motive. Adding the perspective of the caste distinction and the community rules Karnad equips Arvasu with a witty yet satiric statement. Arvasu says, “All these days I couldn’t touch you because Brahmins don’t 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 someone else once we’re married?” (Karnad 8)

In Act two, Arvasu is not allowed to meet Nittilai as he has failed to attend the council meeting. Nittilai’s brother here can be seen to be acting as her guardian. He explains that the father is humiliated and he was “willing to marry her off to anyone who take her” (Karnad 32). However, one of the relatives has agreed, so she will be married off. He further states that he can’t even talk to her before the marriage is over and after marriage, it is up to her and her husband. The parental attitude portrays how patriarchy has shackled the choices of Nittiali and forced her to marry someone else. Arvasu’s delay resulted in the forceful marriage of Nittilai where she was left with no choice but to obey. Later in the third act, she runs away from her husband to attend Arvasu but she had to pay it with her life. At the end of the play, Nittilai is murdered by her husband while her brother also remains an accomplice in the act. One of the critics points out :

“Nittilai seems to suffer double marginalization, as is often the lot of communities divided on the lines of caste and colour, she is marginalized from the mainstream as belonging to Shudra caste. In her own community, she is presented as one demanding her right to take a life partner of her choice” (Jayalakshmi 255)

The portrayal of the character of Nittilai reflects the condition of women even in contemporary society where they are obliged to adhere to the patriarchal customs which has been a part of the moral authority ingrained deeply in most cultures. So, Karnad’s addition of the character of Nittilai to the mythic story exemplifies how myth adaptation is instrumental in challenging the long-held cultural beliefs which may have been preached by the mythological tales themselves.

The character of the Actor-Manager is also an addition made by Karnad. It bears a close resemblance to Sutradhara or Sthapaka of ancient classical Sanskrit plays or the Bhagavatam of Yakshagana. Natyashastra mentions, “After the preliminaries have been duly performed in the manner described, the Introducer (Sthapaka) should enter [the stage] and he should resemble the Director (Sutradhara) in every respect (lit. in quality and form)” ((Muni 97). Sutradhar means the ‘holder of strings’ or the director of the play. The classical Sanskrit plays begin with the Purvaranga and are followed by the sthavana, a scene in which the

Sutradhara or the director situates the play by giving the necessary background information to the audience. The Actor-Manager in *The Fire and The Rain* plays a similar role. Interestingly the Actor-Manager is instrumental in initiating a prologue, which serves the purpose of two plays at once: *The Fire and The Rain* and *The Triumph of Lord Indra*. Now, as per the first play, he hints at the past by bringing in the plea of performing a play to honor the festival. At the same time, he also gives out the mythical reference of the origin of drama as mentioned in the *Natya Shastra* which hints at the relation of drama and sacrifice.

As sutradhara is entitled to the task of carrying out the play successfully, the Actor-Manager too remains an important character who is instrumental in the performance of both plays. Considering the perspective of adaptation, it should be noted that the Actor-Manager is not only limited to the role of sutradhara here. At the end of the play, he acts in the play within a play. So, the Actor-Manager portrays the role of sutradhara as well as the actor playing the role of an actor. Through adaptation, Karnad has borrowed as well as transformed the ancient idea of sutradhara here. He not only introduces the play but also acts in it. In act three, Arvasu's desire to act could be fulfilled only because of the Actor-Manager's idea of keeping him in the view of the public by presenting him in a play. Therefore, the character of the Actor-Manager adds as a pivotal character without whom the play cannot be performed.

The character of Bharadwaja is subtracted as he is dead. By avoiding the character of Bharadwaja, Karnad has been able to exclude a minor part of the story which is present in *Mahabharata*. Similarly, the female spirit who accompanies the Brahma rakshasa is absent from the play. In myth, the *kriya* summoned a Brahma rakshasa and a female spirit who resembles the daughter-in-law of Raibhya but here the function of the female spirit is carried out by Vishakha. So, by adding and subtracting two characters from the mythic narrative, Karnad has presented the adapted version of the mythic story of Yavakri.

Apart from the new characters added by Karnad, the other characters are transformed to adapt the story in the theatrical mode. Here, it should be noted that there is a shift in medium or change in the mode of engagement. As per Linda Hutcheon, "The most commonly considered adaptations are those that move from the telling to the showing mode, usually from print to performance" (Hutcheon 38). So, Karnad's adaptation can be considered under the 'telling to showing mode'. The story in myth does not have character traits or synchronic dialogues laid out to perform as it is in the narrative mode. Ascetic Lomhasa is narrating the story to Pandavas, so, the narrative has only included the necessary plot structure which serves the purpose of narrating the story from a subjective point of view. In the context of *Mahabharata*, it can be said that the motive may have been to preach the moral lessons or the lessons Lomasha intended to depict. So, many aspects of the characters lay open for personal interpretation.

Therefore, Karnad's process of adapting depends on his own interpretation. He explored the gaps present in the mythic narrative and presented them with modifications to make the story suitable for the stage. This may have led to the development of the character traits based on his understanding of the story combined with his intentional projection. Yavakri is malicious which may be due to the unequal treatment meted out to his father. This remains a contextual interpretation in this play as Bharadwaja is dead and absent. As per Karnad's adapted version, Yavakri and Vishakha were lovers in their adolescent days. He left Vishakha and went to the

jungle for the attainment of ultimate knowledge. Vishakha is married to Parvasu while Yavakri was still away. Years later when he returns, he uses her as a means to challenge Raibhya and have his revenge. Referring to the power struggle in the Brahmanical society, Vanashree Tripathi states :

“Tracing the history of power to the primordial times, the playwright confronts us with the truth of power relations in which both the dominating and the dominated are jointly engaged; living socially is to be involved in power relations. Yavakri is unable to forget the fact of being wronged by the power hungry, Raibhya and his son, Parvasu” (Tripathi 140).

However, it should also be noted that in myth, Yavakri gave into his sensuousness when he reached Raibhya’s hermitage while wandering aimlessly. Here, Yavakri intentionally goes towards the hermitage to seduce the daughter-in-law of Raibhya. So, it can be said that Karnad has transformed the character of Yavakri and presented it to portray the motif of revenge as well as the condition of women in a patriarchal society where they are mostly looked upon as mere objects.

Raibhya is a powerful brahmin embittered with old age, he is also a staunch patriarch who treats his daughter-in-law in a demeaning manner. He exploits her sexually as well as mentally. He is also jealous because his son Parvasu was chosen over him to preside as the chief priest at the fire sacrifice. Vishakha’s words clearly explain the character to Raibhya, she says “On the one hand, there’s his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other, there’s lust. It consumes him... 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” (Karnad 38). This proves that he uses Vishakha to satisfy his urge. In myth, Raibhya is portrayed as an angry Brahmin who invokes *kriya* to revenge his daughter-in-law’s molestation at the hand of Yavakri. He was accidentally killed by his son Parvasu contrary to his murder in the play. Therefore, the character of Raibhya presented in this play bears little resemblance to the one present in myth. So, while adapting the character of Raibhya, Karnad has transformed it according to his storyline.

Parvasu is presented as a very ambitious person who wants to confront “Indra in silence. As an equal brahmin” (Karnad 37). He is calculative and treads cautiously to achieve his own goal. In his pursuit, he even kills his father who according to him was trying to disturb him in his duty of performing the fire sacrifice. He is proud but unlike Yavakri he maintains a calm outlook. “Karnad has presented Parvasu as the symbol of supreme egotism. Parvasu through the fire sacrifice was trying not to seek blessings from Lord Indra but to equal him” (Verma 181). On the other hand, Parvasu accuses his brother of patricide and ousts him from the sacrificial enclosure. This exposes the ruthless attitude in Parvasu’s character who applies all possible tactics to keep his status and respect in the brahmin community. In *Mahabharata*, Parvasu is not portrayed as viciously as it is presented in the play. He kills his father accidentally, mistaking him for a wild animal. But in both texts, Parvasu tactfully handles the situation and blames Arvasu.

Vishakha is not present in the mythic story, instead, Parvasu’s wife remains unnamed and she is addressed as the daughter-in-law of Raibhya. It should be noted that in *Mahabharata*, the daughter-in-law of Raibhya agrees to the advances of Yavakri. She takes him to a private

place and keeps him chained. Here, Vishakha is portrayed as an old lover of Yavakri. She was married to Paravasu when Yavakri was practicing penance in the jungle. Her compulsion to submit to her father reflects the coarse patriarchal practice ingrained in the society, one of the critics explains:

“The decision of her marriage with Paravasu, taken by her father, indicates woman’s submission to patriarchal decisiveness that is to be followed, unquestioned in the culture. Her acceptance of her father’s choice indicates the pressure of the patriarchal system.”(Nimsarkar 146).

Similarly, Nittilai was also married according to her father’s decision. Vishakha becomes a pawn in the patriarchal power struggle. She is seduced by Yavakri to provoke Raibhya. Interestingly she also becomes partially responsible for Yavakri’s death. She pours the water from the kamandulu of Yavakri when he boasts of his power to encounter the Brahma Rakshasa. In myth, the kamandulu was stolen by the female who resembled Raibhya’s daughter-in-law. Apart from this, Vishakha is presented as the lonely wife of Paravasu who is also an object of lust for Raibhya. She is also physically tortured by her father-in-law. In act one, when she refused to answer Raibhya, he grabs her by the hair and starts beating her. Raibhya also mentions rhetorically that Vishakha has nowhere else to go. With the transformation of the character of Paravasu’s wife, Karnad has skillfully reflected the customs of the patriarchal world where women are helpless and remain an insignificant entity. As Jayalakshmi rightly puts it, “Nittilai and Vishakha are both victims of male control, consequent to which is oppression and exploitation inflicted upon them by the often violent heterogenous male subjects” (Jayalakshmi 255)

Arvasu is portrayed as a simple and innocent brahmin who loves to act, sing and dance. He along with Nittilai provides a contrast to the other characters who are engrossed in the pursuit of power, knowledge, and fame. He says, “It suddenly occurred to me how stupid I was being. I’ll never be learned like father or uncle. I shan’t ever conduct the royal sacrifice like Paravasu or perform penance like cousin Yavakri. All I want is to dance and sing and act. And be with Nittilai” (Karnad 9). This proves that Arvasu is not even bothered by the things Yavakri, Paravasu, and Raibhya is concerned with. On the other hand, it is Arvasu who cremates Yavakri and bears the burden of performing the rites of penance after Paravasu kills their father. This depicts that though Arvasu did not care about the brahminical way of life, he could not avoid being a part of their ritualistic beliefs. Being aware of his simplicity, Paravasu manipulates him to carry out the penance which he should have done on his own. Arvasu’s repressed emotions come alive with the mask of Vritra which he wears while performing in *The Triumph of Lord Indra*. At the end of the play, when he had the option of bringing Nittilai back to life, he chose to sympathize with the Brahma Rakshasa and requests Indra to grant him his release. Yet again the Brahma Rakshasa convince him to carry out his task by stating that even Nittilai would have wanted the release for him. Karnad has presented Arvasu not as a traditional brahmin boy but as one who despite being born in the brahmin family has his desire to act, sing and dance.

The story presented by Karnad has many deviations from myth in the plot which highlights the creative approach of adaptation. Along with the deviations, Karnad has also added the fragments from Indra-Vritra episodes. Raibhya and Bharadwaja are presented as brothers

here whereas in myth they are friends. Bharadwaja is absent in the play because he is already dead. Yavakri and Vishakha are presented as old lovers here, but in the mythic story, there is no reference to Yavakri's lover. So, the episode of romance between them in the play is purely Karnad's invention. Similarly, there was no challenge between Raibhya and Yavakri in the mythic story. In myth, Yavakri gave into his sensuousness after seeing Parvasu's wife and tried to molest Parvasu's wife. So, Raivya invoked *kritya* in anger to avenge the molestation. Here, in this play, Yavakri intentionally seduces Vishakha and it was a pre-planned move to challenge Raibhya. Similarly, Raibhya's death was not an intentional murder in myth but here, Parvasu kills his father due to jealousy.

In *Mahabharata*, at the end of the story when Parvasu ousted his brother Arvasu accused him of patricide, he went to the jungle to practice hard penance and sought the protection of the Sun god. The celestials became pleased and makes him the chief priest. As per his request, Raivya, Bharadwaja, and Yavakri are restored to life and Parvasu is absolved of his sin. In the play, after Arvasu was ousted he finds himself on the outskirts of the town. Nittilai nurses him and the Actor Manager offers him the role of Vritra in his play, *The Triumph of Lord Indra*. The play is performed and at the end of the play, Indra grants the blessing. But here the dead characters are not brought back to life, instead, it rains and the Brahma Rakshasa is released. The plays end with Arvasu holding to the Nittilai's corpse and the villagers rejoicing the rains.

Girish Karnad through the process of adaptation went back to the roots of Indian culture by situating *The Fire and The Rain* in the tradition of classical Indian drama. By doing so, he has not only questioned the cultural norms associated with the mythic tales but also put forth the significant impact of myth in the construction of moral codes in Indian society. From the structural point of view, the play stands as an exemplary piece of art reflecting the national sentiments in the post-independence Indian dramatic arena. The diverse thematic concerns explain that the motive behind Karnad's adaptation of the *Mahabharata* was to delve deep into the study of the human psyche reeling under the dichotomy of desire and cultural mores of contemporary society. Through this drama Karnad once again wanted to draw the attention of the audience as well as delight them with the charismatic appeal of theatrical arts as mentioned in Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra*.

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