

The Fire And The Rain : A Play of Sacrifice and Expiation

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Abstract

Girish Karnad, a versatile playwright, actor and director, is an outstanding dramatist in contemporary Indian English drama. He is a prolific writer who has been influenced by the trends in Kannada literature. His plays are based on legend, history, myth and folklore. **The Fire and the Rain** are based on the Mahabharata. Karnad's plays are remarkable for stageability. He evolved a dramatic technique which changes according to the requirements of his plots. His plots are precise and the devices of comparison and contrast, suspense and surprise help in the logical development of the play. **The Fire and The Rain** is based on the myth of Yavakri and Parvasu from the Mahabharata. Karnad makes certain variations from the Mahabharata in order to suit his dramatic technique. It highlights the danger of knowledge without wisdom. The myth is relevant to contemporary Indian society. Men at the helm of affairs do not apply wisdom to the use of knowledge in the right direction. Hence, we are facing chaos, bloodshed, corruption and all manifestations of evil. 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. **The Fire and The Rain** is a play of sacrifice and expiation. The play begins with the seven year long fire sacrifice (Yajna), which is being held to propitiate Indra, the God of Rains. It has not adequately rained for ten years. So drought has gripped the land. Several step-like brick altars have been constructed. The priests are offering oblations to the fire in these altars and are singing prescribed hymns in unison.

Keywords: Fire, Rain, Sacrifice, Girish Karnad, rituals.

The Fire And The Rain : A Play of Sacrifice and Expiation

Girish Karnad, a versatile playwright, actor and director, is an outstanding dramatist in contemporary Indian English drama. He is a prolific writer who has been influenced by the trends in Kannada literature. He based the plots of his famous plays **Tughlaq**, **Hayavadana**, **Naga Mandala**, **The Fire and the Rain**, **Talé-Danda**, **Bali**, **the Sacrifice** and **The Dreams of Tipu Sultan** on legend, history, myth and folklore. **Tughlaq**, influenced by Caligula, is a historical play which deals with the turbulent reign of Tughlaq from 1324 to 1351. Karnad was fascinated by the history of Tughlaq's reign because it reflected the political mood of disillusionment which prevailed in the sixties of the twentieth century in India.

Karnad dramatises a folk tale successfully in **Hayavadana** which is based on Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, In **Naga-Mandala** also Karnad uses both folk tale and myth which are integral parts of Indian heritage and psyche **Talé-Danda** is a historical play in which the dramatist interprets current religious, political and social context through historical plot.

Yayati and **The Fire and the Rain** are based on the Mahabharata. **The Dreams of Tipu Sultan** is a historical play that depicts the life and vision of Tipu Sultan in the last phase of his life. **Bali, the Sacrifice**, presents the conflict of moral beliefs of Jain and Hindu religions. Karnad frankly exposes the futility of superstitions, irrationality of certain beliefs and religious beliefs.

Karnad's plays are remarkable for stageability. He evolved a dramatic technique which changes according to the requirements of his plots. His plots are precise and the devices of comparison and contrast, suspense and surprise help in the logical development of the play. His characters are vivid and well delineated. Karnad's English is lucid and simple; his dialogues are precise, straightforward and pointed. He has successfully moulded English to express typical Indian ethos. Aparna Dhawadker rightly pointed out that,

“Karnad has the knack to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience.”¹

The Fire and The Rain is based on the myth of Yavakri and Paravasu from the Mahabharata. Karnad makes certain variations from the Mahabharata in order to suit his dramatic technique. It highlights the danger of knowledge without wisdom. The myth is relevant to contemporary Indian society. Men at the helm of affairs do not apply wisdom to the use of knowledge in the right direction. Hence, we are facing chaos, bloodshed, corruption and all manifestations of evil.

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 transcreated 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, an 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.”²

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 Parvasu, while still in college, in C. Rajgopalachari's abridgement of Mahabharata. But he acknowledges his debt to Arunacharya Katti of Dharwar, a purohit who explained to him the importance of Yajna.

The Fire and The Rain is a play of sacrifice and expiation. The play begins with the seven year long fire sacrifice (Yajna), which is being held to propitiate Indra, the God of Rains. It has not adequately rained for ten years. So drought has gripped the land. Several step-like brick altars have been constructed. The priests are offering oblations to the fire in these altars and are singing prescribed hymns in unison.

The priests, dressed in long flowing seamless pieces of cloth and wearing sacred threads, are performing the fire sacrifice. The King is also dressed like them but his head is covered. Parvasu, the Chief Priest, conducts and supervises the sacrifice. The sacrifice or Yajna is performed inside a sacrificial enclosure in order to protect it from disruption of any kind. The disruption may come from outside, either from a human agency (unruly audience, mischief mongers, intruders, those unable to understand what is happening, demons) or from a more general calamity (rain, storm, upheavals). Commenting on Yajna or Fire Sacrifice Karnad quotes from *The Sacred Thread: A Short History of Hinduism*,

“In Vedic thought, as in Iranian tradition, there was a conception of the world as due not to a chance encounter of elements but as governed by an objective order, inherent in the nature of things, of which the gods are only the guardians. The sacrifice (Yajna) is performed on behalf of an individual householder, technically called the sacrificer, accompanied by his wife, but all the ritual acts are performed by the priests, varying in number from one to sixteen and ultimately seventeen officiates in full.....sacrifice..... A special area is consecrated for each performance of a ritual and the sacrificer undergoes a consecration setting him apart from the profane world. In essence, the sacrifice can be regarded as a periodic ritual by which the universe is recreated, with the sacrifice like his prototype incorporating the Prajapati”.³

The ritualistic conception of the sacrifice has been clarified. The term sacrifice has been used in wider connotation. It also implies the sacrifice of the varied manifestations of human relationship. Sacrifice and expiation are fused together in this play.

Yavakri, has undergone terrible ordeals in the forest for ten years for observing penance and austerities in order to gain universal knowledge and spirituality. He sacrifices the pleasure of

his life at the altar of revenge. He feels that his father Bhardwaj, the most learned man and the most brilliant mind in the land, was humiliated by Raibhya and his son, Parvasu. His father deserved to be the Chief Priest at the fire sacrifice but Parvasu grabbed it. His sacrifice is based on the misuse of knowledge. Indra who imparted knowledge to him after the completion of ten year long penance advised him to be humble and modest. Indra says:

"You are ready to receive knowledge. But knowledge involves control of passions, serenity, objectivity." I shouted back: "No, that's not the knowledge I want. That's not knowledge. That's suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I'll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious destructive." 4

Yavakri sacrifices the real purpose of knowledge and makes it an instrument of taking revenge on his uncle Raibhya and his family. Yavakri coaxes Vishakha to have sex with him. Her husband, Parvasu, who has been appointed the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice has been away for seven years. The fortune of humiliation, isolation and privacy turns her emotionally dry and shattered. She says:

"I have known what it is to grow heavy, burst open, drip and rot, to fill the world with one's innards.....Alone I have because dry like a tender. Ready to burst into flames at a breath". 5

Indeed, Parvasu sacrifices Vishakha at the altar of his own reputation and achievements. Yavakri's tender words and caresses arouse the woman in her and she surrenders to him. When she returns to her cottage, her father-in-law, Raibhya, abuses her and she silently accepts all humiliation and insult. When she comes to know that Raibhya has invoked Kritya and has sent Brahma Rakshasa to kill Yavakri, she runs to inform Yavakri to stay within his father's cottage because his life is in danger. Yavakri tells her that he had meticulously planned everything to take revenge on Raibhya and his family.

"Do you think all this happened accidentally? You think I would have anything to chance? How do you think? Arvasu happened to arrive at the river-bank at the right moment? Who called your father-in-law back?" 6

He frankly tells her that her father-in-law will die and her husband, Parvasu, will hide "like a bandicoot in his ritual world" or "he will commit sacrilege by stepping out to face me". At this revelation she feels disillusioned and humiliated. She realises her fault and repents for yielding to him. Vishakha is twice sacrificed. First, her husband sacrifices her for his fame and pleasure, and secondly, Yavakri her former lover, sacrifices her at the altar of revenge. Yavakri has outraged her female modesty and dignity.

Yavakri has outraged her female modesty and dignity. She sprinkles the consecrated water from Yavakri's Kamandalu. He has sanctified the water to destroy Kriya and Brahma Rakshasa, He is now helpless and powerless. Brahma Rakshasa kills him. Vishakha sacrifices Yavakri for outraging her feminine modesty deceptively.

Parvasu nurtures inplacable hatred for his father Raibhya, who insults and humiliates him. His wife Vishakha tells him that he is jealous of his son's progress and reputation. He is so lustful that he rapes her in his absence:

“On the one hand, there's his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other, there's lust. It consumes him. And old man's curdled lust. And there is no one else here to take his rage out on but me.”⁷

Parvasu kills his father one night. Justifying his murder he tells Vishakha:

“He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any farther.”⁸

Parvasu sacrifices his father at the altar of his hatred. Parvasu is selfish. He cares only for his own popularity. He is so self centred that he does not even hesitate to accuse Arvasu, his younger brother, of patricide and Brahminicide, a crime that he himself has committed. He keeps the truth a secret because if:

"anyone gets wind of what's happened here, the fire sacrifice is ruined".⁹

Had there been no fire sacrifice, he would have atoned for father's death and should have performed the rites of penitence. So he shrewdly enjoins upon Arvasu the duty of cremating their father's dead body and perform the penitential rites. Parvasu, thus, sacrifices Arvasu at the altar of his own reputation and good will.

Arvasu assumes demonic role in the play within play, which ultimately leads to the desecration of the Yajana sight. Parvasu silently watches the chaos and does not resist it at all. He gets up without a word calmly and walks into the blazing enclosure. He, it seems, feels the pricks in his conscience for killing his father and for accusing innocent Arvasu for patricide. So he gladly chooses death within the sacrificial enclosure as an act of expiation.

Nittilai is a selfless character who sacrifices her life because she "cannot resist her human impulse to rush to Arvasu's aid when the enclosure erupts in flames, even though she is hiding from her tribe."¹⁰

The play ends with the final redemptive act of "Arvasu's 'real life' decision to sacrifice his own happiness with Nittilai for the sake of Brahma Rakshasa's release."¹¹

“The Fire and The Rain”, says Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar, "is a drama of sacrifice and expiation. The fire sacrifice is a propitiatory ritual intended to end the community's suffering,

But it is corrupted in multiple ways by Parvasu: his death is a form of personal atonement, but the communal crisis is resolved through other painful resignations. Parvasu also offers up Vishakha's life, first to his sensual appetite and then to his lust for fame while Vishakha

unwittingly sacrifices Yavakri to her very love for him. Nittilai dies for the sake of Arvasu, and Arvasu surrenders Nittilai for the common good."12

The duality and divergence between the two orders-the Brahminical and the dalit or tribal-has been brilliantly depicted in *The Fire and The Rain*. Arvasu is the connecting link between the two worlds. Yavakri, Raibhya and Parvasu are notoriously power hungry but spiritually and morally empty. All these characters are guilty of deliberate evil. They are secretive. They lack in openness, frankness, spirituality and human values. Their learning, austerities, penance and sacrifice are merely facade enveloping their depravity, immorality, incestuousness, deceitfulness and treachery. Arvasu emerges as a contrast to them. Although he is a Brahmin by birth, he has no pretensions. He has committed himself to love and community." He gladly renounces the Brahminical order for Nittilai's sake.

There is also a parallel fire sacrifice in play within play, entitled *The Triumph of Lord Indra*. Indra decides to organize a fire sacrifice in honour of Brahma, the Lord of all creation. He invites Vishwarupa, his brother, to t this sacrifico. He does not invite the youngest brother, Vritra because he is the son a demoness, Indra, Vishwarupa and Vritra are the sons of Brahma. In this fire sacrifice Indra deceitfully kills his brother Vishwarupa. Parvasu, who is seeing the play-within-play, is badly upset. His own crime of killing his father recoils on him. Arvasu, who is playing the role of Vritra, disrupts the fire sacrifice and rushes into the sacrificial pavilion, which begins burning. The tribals, the poor and the hungry desecrate the sacrifice. They cat and drink the food kept for gods. They level the sacrifice to the ground. The fire sacrifice has been disrupted. Parvasu has been silently watching the chaos. He suddenly gets up and walks into the burning sacrificial enclosure. Parvasu expiates by sacrificing himself in the fire sacrifice for fratricide.

Arvasu fails to take revenge on him. He says:

I lost, Nittilai, And Parvasu won. He went and sat there in front of the altar, unafraid and carried on with the sacrifice. I couldn't destroy him."13

The fire sacrifice has been disrupted. Rain does not fall. Arvasu with Nittilai's corpse on his shoulder goes into the burning structure. The fire dies out. Indra, who is pleased with Arvasu, appears before and persuades him to ask for anything he wants. Crowds request him to ask for rains but he wants that Nittilai be restored to life, Indra cautious him that if the wheel of time rolls back Parvasu, Raibhya and Yavakri too may return to life. Even those who died all over the earth at the same time as his family, would also come back to life. The souls of Nittilai, Parvasu, Raibhya, Yavakri, Andhak and many dead people enter the stage silently and come close to Parvasu. Meanwhile Brahma Rakshasa, who begs for his release, appears,

Indra tells him that "the wheel of Time must roll back if Nittilai is to return to life. It must roll forward for the Brahma Rakshasa to be released." Arvasu will have to choose either the restoration of the life of Nittilai and others or the release of the Brahma Rakshasa. He pleads for his release and tells Arvasu that Nittilai, gentle soul, would have cared for him and would have "wept at the thought of my endless life in death. If you bring her back, you'll have

destroyed what made her such a beautiful person." He adds that if Nittilai lives again, she will live a life as tormented as his. Arvasu seriously requests Indra to release Brahma Rakshasa, who cries in triumph. The souls of Nittilai and others vanish into nothingness.

It begins to rain. The crowds exclaim:

"What's it? You smell that? Yes. Yes. The smell of wet earth, Of fresh rains. It's raining. Somewhere. Nearby. The air is blossoming with the fragrance of earth. It's raining-It's raining-Rain | The Rain!"¹⁴

It is the selfless sacrifice of Arvasu that pleases Indra and consequently the rain begins to fall after ten years. Human kindness gets victory over personal love. The title of the play *The Fire and The Rain* is apt, short and suggestive.

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