

THE FIRE AND THE RAIN: RHETORIC OF REVENGE AND VIOLENCE

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Introduction

The play *The Fire and the Rain (Agni Mattu Male)* was originally written in Kannada in 1995. It was published in English in 1998 by the playwright himself. It was successfully staged in Kannada, Hindi, and English. Many theatre critics have highly appreciated the theme and the subject-matter of the play. It stands apart from the other plays of Karnad since it displays the unmitigated violence arising from selfishness, greed, and sinfulness. Bhasker Chandavarkar has described the play as “not only Karnad’s best work but one that he will be unable to surpass.” It is a dense, intellectually ambitious, autumnal play structured around ideas... and a plethora of tangled relationships which unfold with a rare economy and intensity of words and emotions... in it, Karnad reconstructs the world of Hindu antiquity and gives us a story of passion, loss, and sacrifice in the contexts of Vedic ritual, spiritual discipline (*tapasya*), social and ethical differences between human agents, and interrelated forms of performance still close to their moments of origin.¹

The entire play depicts the negative impulses of a human being such as anger, violence, bloodshed, jealousy, pride, false knowledge, the intense feeling of hostility, hatred, greed, treachery and revenge. Karnad finds the myth quite relevant to the contemporary society. The play communicates the message that abuse of knowledge ultimately leads to the destruction of the world. It vividly portrays the conflict between the Brahmin traditional community and the benevolent tribal community. The former is rigid and ritualistic (symbolized by “fire”) whereas the latter is community-oriented and life-giving (symbolized by “rain”). The title of the play is used aptly and suggestively. The Brahminic culture is fire which destroys everything and the tribal culture is rain which gives and sustains life.

The Play’s Basis: The Myth of Yavakri

The Fire and the Rain is Karnad’s most complex play which is based on the myth of Yavakrita taken from chapters 135-138 of the Vana Parva (the forest canto) of the Mahabharata. Karnad spent nearly thirty seven years to complete the play. In his note on *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad he in brief the original myth of Yavakri:

There were two sages, Bharadwaja and Raibhya, who were good friends. Raibhya was a learned man who lived with his two sons while Bharadwaja concentrated on his ascetic practices. Yavakri, Bharadwaja’s son, nursed a grievance against the world, for he felt his father did not receive the respect and recognition he deserved.

He further went off to the forest and did *tapasya* (penance) so that he could obtain the knowledge of the Vedas from the gods direct. The rigours of his ascetic practice were such that

Indra, the lord of gods, appeared to him, but only to persuade him that there were no such short cuts to knowledge. Knowledge has to be obtained by studying at the feet of a guru. But Yavakri was so adamant that Indra ultimately relented and let him have his wish.

Bharadwaja, being a wise man, was anxious lest the triumph turn his son's head and cautioned Yavakri against delusions of omnipotence. But his fears unfortunately proved well-founded. For one of the first things Yavakri did was to corner Raibhya's daughter-in-law in a lonely spot and molest her. Yavakri's misdemeanour incensed Raibhya. He invoked the *Kritya* spirit. He tore a hair from his head and made an oblation of it to the fire. From it sprang a woman who looked exactly like his daughter-in-law. From another hair he similarly brought forth a *rakshasa* (demon). Then, he sent the two to kill Yavakri.

The spirit in the form of the daughter-in-law approached Yavakri seductively and stole the urn which contained the water that made him invulnerable to danger. The *rakshasa* then chased him with a trident.

Yavakri ran towards a lake in search of water, but the lake dried up. Every spot with a bit of water in it dried up at his approach. Finally, Yavakri tried to enter his father's hermitage. But a blind man of the Sudra caste, who was guarding the gate, barred Yavakri's entry. At that moment the *rakshasa* killed Yavakri.

When Bharadwaja learnt from the Sudra how his son had died, he was naturally distressed. Although he knew that his son was to blame for all that had happened, he cursed Raibhya that he would die at the hand of his elder son. And then shocked at his own folly in cursing a friend, he entered fire and immolated himself.

Raibhya's two sons, Parvasu and Arvasu, were conducting a fire sacrifice for the King. One night when Parvasu was visiting his home, he mistook the black deer-skin which his father was wearing for a wild animal and unintentionally killed him.

When he realized what he had done, he cremated his father and returned to the sacrificial enclosure. There he said to his brother Arvasu: 'Since you are not capable of performing the sacrifice alone, go and perform the penitential rites prescribed for Brahminicide. I'll carry on with the sacrifice.'

Arvasu did his brother's bidding. When he returned to the sacrifice-ceremony, Parvasu turned to the King and said, 'This man is a Brahmin-killer. He should not be allowed to enter the sacrificial enclosures.' The king promptly ordered his servants to throw Arvasu out, although the latter kept protesting loudly that he was innocent.

Arvasu retired to the jungle and prayed to the Sun God. When the gods appeared, he asked them to restore Yavakri, Bharadwaja and Raibhya back to life and make Parvasu forget his evil act. The gods granted him the boon. When Yavakri came back to life, the gods reprimanded him on his folly and asked him to pursue knowledge in the right manner.²

The Play's Theme and the Story

In this play, Karnad skillfully exploits the myth of Yavakri and that of Indra-Vritra to focus on the negative and positive impulses of the human being, the immoral qualities of the priestly class and how they dominate and exploit the lower class people. The play also highlights the innocent, pure and natural world of the lower castes. The story of Arvasu and Nittilai which begins as a subplot grows in significance and towards the climax takes centre stage.

The Fire and the Rain is divided into three acts along with Prologue and Epilogue. By making some alterations in the original story, Karnad unfolds the inner mind of each character.

The central action of the play focuses on the motif of revenge, futility of false knowledge and the feebleness of human nature. In order to make his play more effective and relevant to the contemporary society, Karnad deviates from the original episode at several places. Besides, he has introduced a few additional characters like Nittilai, the tribals, and the actors who together with Arvasu make up the subplot.

Bhardwaja and Raibhya, the two friends in the myth are made as brothers in the play and their sons become cousins. Again he makes Vishakha as a lover of Yavakri. In the myth, Raibhya creates the female spirit from his hair that resembles his daughter-in-law Vishakha and asks her to assist the Brahma Rakshasa in the killing of Yavakri. However in the play, Vishakha herself goes to Yavakri to inform him about the impending danger. Raibhya's character is also altered considerably. He is made to appear as lustful, suspicious, jealous, and revengeful murderer. In the myth, Parvasu kills his father unintentionally but, in the play, it is done deliberately. In the myth, the Brahma Rakshasa goes to live with the female spirit but in the play, he wants liberation from his state of limbo between life and death.

The most vital change is made in the character of Arvasu. In the play, he is not a learned priest. On the contrary, he is shown as an artist in the drama. Arvasu is seen to be in deep love with a tribal girl, Nittilai and wishes to marry her. Through the sincere and honest love of Arvasu and Nittilai, Karnad raises the problem of the caste system. Parvasu's character as the immoral Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice remains unchanged.

The structural plan of *The Fire and the Rain* runs into three parallel streams: Raibhya and Vishakha at the hermitage, the sacrificial place with Parvasu as the Chief Priest and story of Nittilai and Arvasu with the company of the theatre.

The most significant addition to the myth in the play is the story of Indra and Vritra taken from the *Rigveda*. It is very effectively presented through the play-within-the-play enacted by the troupe of actors and Arvasu to emphasize the treachery of a brother against brother. Commenting on the inclusion of Indra-Vritra myth in the play Karnad himself aptly remarks:

The tale of Arvasu and Parvasu fascinated me as an unusual variant of this Indian obsession with fratricide... I cannot remember when I decided to incorporate the Indra-Vritra legend in my plot, but years later, while rereading the original version, I was astonished to find that right at the beginning of the tale of Yavakri.³

The play starts with the Prologue which presents the complicated details of the fire sacrifice ceremony. The entire action of the play centres on the ritual of fire sacrifice. As the play begins, it is noticed that the land is a drought-ridden. So, the King of this region has determined to conduct a fire sacrifice in order to propitiate Indra, the god of rains.

Parvasu, the elder son of Raibhya, is the Chief Priest who conducts the ceremony of a seven-year-long fire-sacrifice with several other priests. As the afternoon session of the fire-sacrifice is over, the Actor-Manager of a troupe comes there and requests them to grant him a permission to stage a play in honour of the fire sacrifice.

The prologue throws light on the inner world of the characters that represents them as the embodiment of fiery desires and ironically it is in the fire that they seek final liberation: Yavakri in the funeral fire and Parvasu in the sacrificial fire. We are tempted to perceive fire as a pervasive symbol in all its potentials in the play.⁴

The first act one focuses on the issue of love-marriage of Nittilai, a tribal girl and Arvasu, a younger son of Raibhya. While conversing with Nittilai and Arvasu, Andhaka, in the role of Sutradhar-actor, refers to the penance and achievements of Yavakri, the son of sage Bharadwaja.

Karnad has ironically used Yavakri's penance to criticize the typical tendency of the Brahmins to attain universal knowledge for fulfilling their private ends.

Soon after his return, Yavakri learns that Vishakha, his childhood mate, has married to Parvasu, his rival cousin. He meets her in a lonely place in the forest. She succumbs to Yavakri's fascinating words after her initial resistance. Raibhya, considers it the insult of the entire family. To take revenge on Yavakri, he creates "Kritya" spirit, i.e. Brahma Rakshas. Vishakha informs Yavakri her father-in-law's evil intention. But he is quite confident of his safety since he has the consecrated water with him to take revenge on her family. This knowledge makes Vishakha to turn the tables on Yavakri by pouring all the sanctified water from his *kamandalu*. To save his life anyhow, he starts running to reach his father's hermitage. Ironically, Andhaka stops him entering his own father's hermitage. The Brahma Rakshasa appears there and kills him with the trident.

In the second act, Parvasu, against the rules of the fire sacrifice, returns home to meet his wife. The knowledge of her wife's seduction by Yavakri as well as by his own father and his (father's) feeling of jealousy for not getting the role of the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice renders him infuriated and outraged. Ultimately, he kills his father with his arrow in cold blood.

Parvasu goes back to complete the fire sacrifice asking Arvasu to perform the rites of penitence. But to Arvasu's surprise, Parvasu treacherously blames him of killing his father, when the former reaches the sacrificial area, after performing all the funeral rites of his father. In the assault, made by the Brahmins and the king on the order of Parvasu, Arvasu gets wounded.

What Arundhati Banerjee states about Vijay Tendulkar's play *The Vultures* is fit for Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* also:

The beating up of the father by his own sons, ...*the mutual hatred* among the members of family underline *the fundamental evil inherent in human nature*.⁵

The third act three starts with Nittilai, now a married woman, comes to Arvasu to nurse him back to health. The play juxtaposes the contrasting situations. The playwright, here, explores the two worlds : (i) a stormy, sentimental world that is characterized by greed, wickedness, sensuality, and (ii) a fragile, sensitive world that is characterized by love and generosity. Raibhya Parvasu, and Yavakri represent a world of villainy, malice and ill-will, whereas Nittilai and Arvasu represent a world of love and benevolence.

The act concludes with the instruction of the Actor-Manager to Arvasu about the rules of mask performance. The Epilogue takes the audience from the world of Yavakri to that of Indra-Vishwarupa and Vritra a play-within-the-play, in which Arvasu is going to perform the role of Vritra, the demon.

Vishwarupa and Vritra, sons of Brahma, meet and embrace each other. Indra, their eldest brother feels jealous of Vishwarupa thinking that his greatness and popularity has eclipsed his personality. So, he decides to kill him. In order to succeed in his plan, Indra organizes a fire sacrifice and invites Vishwarupa. The moment Vishwarupa tries to enter along with Vritra, Indra stops him objecting to the company of Vritra being a demon, a *Rakshas*. When Vishwarupa was offering oblations to the gods, Indra moves behind and plunges his thunderbolt into Vishwarupa's back. Vishwarupa collapses screaming loudly.

This event of fratricide, enacted on the stage, renders Parvasu guilt-conscious. By using the Brechtian technique of theatre-audience contact, Karnad throws light on the reciprocal relationship between the theatre and life. Brahma Rakshasa who is pleading Parvasu for his release, now leaves him. The audience is greatly perplexed at the increasing sounds and gestures on the stage. Indra's vicious laughter, Vishwarupa's heart-rending screaming

and Parvasu's anxious outburst—all seem mounting towards terrific emotional explosion. In this regard Vanashree Triphathi rightly observes:

The Parvasu-Arvasu parallel with Indra-Vritra and Vishwarupa is complete. Parvasu's calling the demon, Brahma Rakshasa, loudly... reverberates in Arvasu a recognition of himself as Vritra-the Demon... Reality is doubled, and tripled, as Arvasu finds himself enacting two roles, all set to avenge the fratricide of Indra – a prototype of his brother's actions. In Vishwarupa's dying exclamation "You, Brother? Why? I trusted you." (56) The memory of the gross betrayal of his own brother becomes fresh in Arvasu's mind.⁶

Arvasu, forgetting that he is acting, is about to attack Indra (Actor-Manager). However, Nittilai comes and takes off his mask of Vritra. Her interference makes Arvasu normal. But at the same moment, her brother and husband reach the spot and she is killed mercilessly with a knife by her husband. She dies like a sacrificial animal. Arvasu takes her corpse to the sacrificial place. The voice of Indra is heard from the skies, saying, "Arvasu, son, do not grieve....Ask for any boon and it shall be granted." (173) Arvasu wants the life of his beloved to be restored, but the Brahma Rakshasa implores him for his own release. Arvasu, remembering Nittilai's benevolent nature, asks Indra to release Brahma Rakshasa. The play ends in rains. Rain is there not because of sacrificial ritual, but because of the human sacrifice in the form of Nittilai and the grand and noble self sacrifice of Arvasu.

Thus, the Shakespearean technique of the play-within-a-play bridges the gulf between the main plot and the subplot and it brings about a reversal of events.

Critical Interpretation and Appraisal of the Play

The play originally written in Kannada is titled as *Agni Mattu Male*. The playwright himself explains the broader meaning of the word 'Agni.' He writes:

Agni is the Sanskrit word for fire and being a Sanskrit word, it carries, even when used in Kannada, connotations of holiness, of ritual status, of ceremony, which the Kannada word for fire (benki) does not possess. Agni is what burns in sacrificial altars, acts as a witness at weddings and is lit at cremations. It is also the name of the god of fire."

The fire connotes both the negative and positive human impulses such as anger, jealousy, revenge, betrayal, and lust. The rain, on the contrary, denotes the rain of human love and sacrifice, compassion, forgiveness, revival and regeneration. Commenting of various meanings of Agni, P. Jayalakshmi appropriately states: Agni works as anger and revenge in Raibhya, Parvasu, and Yavakri. In Vishakha, it burns as lust; and in the people as hunger due to the persisting drought. In all of them, except in Vishakha, Agni burns as sacrificial fire without its accompanying grace as vision or light. However, this apparently overarching element of Agni (Fire) in the title of the play burns to convey the lessons the human being must learn about the subjugation of one's ego to the Universal Being. Much of the agony in the lives of the major characters is played out on the canvas of human consciousness till they learn this all-essential lesson of humility.⁷

The play depicts various problems such as caste system, patriarchy, man-woman relationship, existentialism, problem of identity and loneliness, etc. Through the myth of Yavakri, the play explores the futility of false knowledge and evils resulting from pride, jealousy, lust, and anger. Yavakri, Raibhya and Parvasu are the victims of egoism and they misappropriate their knowledge for avenging one another. The worlds of Yavakri, Raibhya and Parvasu are filled with hypocrisy, hatred, treachery, violence and revenge. The seduction of Vishakha by her own father-in-law and brother-in-law, the killing of the father by his own son, and that of nephew

by his uncle (indirectly), the brother's attempt to catch his own brother in his treacherous trap throw light on the fundamental evil that resides in human nature. The pursuit of knowledge does not make them free from evils resulting from pride, jealousy, lust and revenge.

Another important theme, the playwright wants to focus is the perennial problem of caste system. The Fire sacrifice is organized to propitiate the god of rains. Low caste people are prohibited to enter the holy area. Priests are directed not to leave the precincts and not talk to the *shudras* and not to give themselves to sensual pleasures.

The play is Karnad's comment on caste as well as gender-biased society. Both the female characters try their best to raise a voice of rebellion. But the extent of their resistance is determined by the gender and caste group to which they belong. It is also observed that their characters are shaped by their respective social positions. Jayalakshmi is quite justified in pointing out: "He (Karnad) re-interprets and re-presents the myth to make a definitive statement in the context of the present. He reconstitutes the ancient myth with fresh revisionary meaning with the additional dimension of gender and caste by creating the narrative of Arvasu and Nittilai. Nittilai is as oppressed as Vishakha or maybe even more, but the oppression in the latter is unnecessary and avoidable. As a member of a family of the learned men trained in leading disciplined life, such treatment for Vishakha is unjustified. In the case of Nittilai, the suffering is due to caste division and gender bias in society and ignorance of men in her community: thus suffering is made unavoidable and inescapable."⁸

To quote Jayalakshmi again "Nittilai and Vishakha are both victims of male control, consequent to which is the oppression and exploitation inflicted upon them by the often violent heterogeneous male subjects. Nittilai seems to suffer double marginalization, as is often the lot of communities divided on lines of caste and colour, she is marginalized from the mainstream as belonging to Sudra caste. In her own community, she is presented for demanding her right to take a life partner of her choice."⁹

Nittilai and Vishakha appear to be in the search for identity. Both of them suffer from the problem of anonymity. Although Vishakha belongs to an upper-caste Brahmin family her position is not different from that of Nittilai. Her social position does not provide her any privilege. Throughout her life, she is dominated by her so-called learned male counterparts. Nittilai belongs to the family of hunters. Both of them are the victims of the male dominated society in which they are subjected equally to violent displacement and silencing. These women characters bring to notice the burning reality of the society that women have been used by their male counterparts as stepping stones in their power struggle. No doubt, they try to challenge that oppression but in the process they meet with a tragic end. Suffering is their lot, the badge of their tribe. It is so, because ... humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, ...she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is ... the Absolute- she is the Other.¹⁰

Both the women characters appear to be the witnesses of womankind's endless suffering in the male dominated society. That is why Jayalakshmi is quite justified in pointing out: "Vishakha and Nittilai, thus, are not mere literary constructs but women real and material, carrying within them their collective histories as women.... The need is for a sympathetic understanding of their oppressive past in grappling with our present-day reality in which also lies real humanity."¹¹

Thus, the position of women in the patriarchal system of society is one of the major thematic concerns of Karnad's plays. The women characters in the play are the victims of patriarchy. Vishakha is exploited by her husband, father-in-law and her former lover. She

becomes a sexual instrument in the hands of the male characters to avenge each other. And Nittilai becomes a victim of the tribal patriarchy. Mala Ranganathan's observation with regard to the oppression of Vishakha and Nittilai in the patriarchal culture is worth considering. She remarks: "The braminical patriarchy in the play reduces the woman to sexual exploitation and neglect by men vying with one another for knowledge and power. Simple as it may appear to be, the tribal patriarchy also proves to be lethal towards women who do not abide by the community rules framed by the male elders."¹²

Vishakha's loneliness in the male-centric world is very effectively presented in the play. She suffers from loneliness because of her selfish and treacherous lover and her self-centred husband. P. Jayalakshmi aptly describes the miserable state of Vishakha by comparing her lonely life to the image of an empty water pot. She comments, "The image of an empty water-pot covered with cobwebs, lying in a corner, discarded, to be replenished with life-giving water, is suggestive metaphorically of the condition of Vishakha's life— dry, barren and empty."¹³

Existentialism seems to be one of the dominant themes in the Karnad play and *The Fire and Rain* is no exception to it. The characters here are found in the existential situation. It is because of his strong hatred for Parvasu, Yavakri is unable to understand the meaning of knowledge. He projects the image of an existential character and shows that a few men are able to make a correct choice. Arvasu also finds himself in existential situation when he is terribly shocked at the treachery of his brother, Parvasu. There are several instances in the play which throw light on how the principal characters confront the existential problems. Thus, the play, in general, presents existential themes namely, the impossibility of possession in love, the illusion of friendship and brotherhood, the isolation and alienation of man, the difficulty of communication and the quest for identity and meaning in an uncertain and often incomprehensible world. It also highlights man's inevitable isolation and alienation in this so called cultured world.

Conclusion

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad has succeeded in projecting harsh realities of the modern civilization which is characterized by stress, strain, confusion, frustration, loneliness, disintegration, and meaninglessness. While depicting the drawbacks and vices of both an individual and society, Karnad's humanitarian approach and his commitment to human values are clearly perceptible. Although the theme of revenge, hatred, violence pervades the entire atmosphere, the play marks the triumph of goodness over evil. That is why the play ends in rains. To conclude the discussion in the words of Jayalakshmi "Here the famine is real and metaphorical. The intent of traditional Yoga 'marga' is not self-mortification, nor the end of all sacrifice for personal gain, but to make the body a perfect instrument of the spirit. That ultimate knowledge Nittilai gains and Arvasu learns, staying in the midst of life not away or outside it— a sign of true perfection."¹⁴

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